

**Edith Collier:**  
Her Life and Work (1885-1964)

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## ABSTRACT

Edith Collier (1885-1964) is a Wanganui artists whose life and oeuvre is the subject of this biographical essay and catalogue raisonné. She was educated in Wanganui, and at the age of twenty-seven years travelled to Britain and remained there almost a decade from 1913-1921, studying and producing art. She enrolled at London's St. John's Wood Art School and toured extensively executing work in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, Kent, Oxford, Bibury, and Bonmahon in Southern Ireland. Margaret Macpherson and Frances Hodgkins were her most significant teachers, and their ideas and the art that she was exposed to in Britain inspired the artist to work in an increasingly modern manner.

Edith Collier returned to New Zealand in the early 1920s with work that reflected the more radical innovations of British modernism, and she was publicly criticised and personally vandalised because of it. Though she worked and exhibited with some determination after her return, from the early 1940s she ceased to paint. The neglect of Edith Collier's career has been canonised in the writings of subsequent art historians, whose theoretical perspective either did not allow an acknowledgment of her achievement, or whose perception of her as a tragic figure did not let them see it.

Edith Collier's contribution to New Zealand art history demands re-evaluation because of her unique place as an early modernist, and in light of the impact of modernism in New Zealand in the 1920s, and particularly in provincial Wanganui. Edith Collier's significance must be re-written in the literature of New Zealand art history, and central to a re-assessment of her achievement is a better understanding of the complex relationship in her biography between the discrimination of sexism and the impact of cultural-lag on the introduction of modern art to New Zealand.

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*Anyone moderately familiar with the rigours of composition will not need to be told the story in detail; how [s]he wrote and it seemed good; read and it seemed vile; corrected and tore up; cut out; put in; was in ecstasy; in despair; had [her] good nights and bad mornings; snatched at ideas and lost them; saw [her] book plain before [her] and it vanished; acted [her] people's parts as [s]he ate; mouthed them as [s]he walked; now cried; now laughed; vacillated between this style and that; now preferred the heroic and pompous; next the plain and simple; now the vales of Tempe; then the fields of Kent or Cornwall; and could not decide whether [s]he was the divinest genius or the greatest fool in the world.*

Virginia Woolf  
*Orlando* (1992), p. 48-9

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*We should ourselves be sorry to think that posterity should judge us by a patchwork of our letters, preserved by chance, independent of their context, written perhaps in a fit of despondency or irritation, divorced, above all, from the myriad little strands which colour and compose our peculiar existence, and which in their multiplicity, their variety and their triviality, are vivid to ourselves alone, uncommunicable even to those nearest to us, sharing our daily life.... Still, within our limitations it is necessary to arrive at some conclusions, certain facts do emerge.*

Vita Sackville-West

Introduction,

*The Diary of the Lady Anne Clifford* (1923) n. p.



# Introduction

In late autumn of 1924, Edith Collier received a letter from her English cousin, Fannie Collier, at that time a lecturer in economics at Manchester University:

I had a fine letter from Harry last week, I was so glad to get it.... He tells me you have sold many of your pictures; I'm very cheered to hear Wanganui appreciates your work in a sensible way. Have you got decent prices? The next question is even more important: Are you turning out fresh work? Don't forget you've to make history as the N. Z. painter of the early 20th century.<sup>1</sup>

Fannie's faith in Edith Collier's talent as an artist, and her conviction that future fame would follow on as a natural consequence of her application of this talent, are echoed in the comments of numerous other people associated with the artist. In 1916, her brother Harry wrote: "I wish you all the luck possible at your exams.... I believe you are of the stuff that excels."<sup>2</sup> Even more significantly, Margaret Macpherson<sup>3</sup> and Frances Hodgkins, Edith Collier's most influential teachers, held a similar view of their younger protégée's prospects and talent. In a letter sent to Edith Collier's mother from Bonmahon in Southern Ireland (1915), Margaret Macpherson concluded:

I think you will be astonished at the quality of her work.... I do not want to eulogise her because I am her teacher, but I assure you, she has an excellent talent in portraiture and ought to do well in New Zealand.<sup>4</sup>

Frances Hodgkins, in a letter to her own mother (1920), observed:

I have one very bright N. Zealander, from Wanganui, Collier by name - who is coming on wonderfully - I'll make something of her I feel sure....<sup>5</sup>

These accolades and the high expectation from her family, friends and teachers form a contrast to the relative 'silence' of their subject, the artist, Edith Collier herself. She has

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Edith Collier, 15 May 1924. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Harry Collier to Edith Collier, 13 January 1916. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>3</sup> Although her name was spelt McPherson on her birth certificate, from 1902 until her marriage to William Preston in 1919, she used a number of alternative spellings. These alternative spellings included, 'MacPherson' and 'Macpherson', though the latter was her preferred spelling, and was used most frequently in her correspondence with Edith Collier.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Margaret Macpherson to Eliza Collier, 2 August [1915]. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, pp. 348-349.

written no books or articles expounding her theories on art, nor has she left any significant body of autobiographical material which might provide some insight into her personal and professional aspirations or aesthetic practice. While her physical movements can often be traced in the titles and subject-matter of her paintings, prints and sketches, her inner sensibilities, her thoughts, opinions, her hopes, and her dreams, occur only as fleeting references, hesitatingly stated in her letters to family and close friends. However, those aspects of Edith Collier's nature which do reveal themselves throughout her life are her misgivings about her work, and her lack of self-confidence, and her doubt that the role she assumes as an artist is an essential and significant one. From her rooms at Leinster Square, London, she conveyed her anxiety to her mother in the opening months of 1915:

You have been wondering if I'll be different and now I am wondering if you will be satisfied and father not think well is she worth all the money I have spent and so on.... Is Thea [her sister] taking drawing she is much cleverer than me and not so gloomy as me I waste half my time in thinking I can't do things.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to New Zealand in 1921, after a nine-year period abroad studying and working as an artist, Edith Collier "re-entered a society where her talents met no recognition and where prudery reached repressive proportions."<sup>7</sup> While her predominantly female network of friends, colleagues and teachers in Britain had operated to encourage her creative output, in New Zealand she faced the ignorance of blinkered conservatism and cutting critical commentary, without the support of other artists. Deprived of the professional networks that she had built up in Britain, the bigotry of critics undercut her sense of self-worth, and this played a significant part in ultimately destroying her on-going commitment to becoming a professional painter. Like many expatriate women and men travelling back to their colonial places of origin, Edith Collier returned to find her ideas and experiences out of step with those currently dominating the local art scene. Without the self-confidence that the artistic persona so often affords the male, Edith Collier was left doubting both her skills and ability as an artist. Self-doubt was followed by compromise and accommodation, and then later by disappointment and finally abandonment. Charlie Ayliff, a fellow student in Britain and life-long woman friend of Edith Collier, commented some forty years later on this ironic outcome:

It is funny how many women begin painting after families grow up - while sinners like you and me Collier never touch it now altho' it was our life work in our youth!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 22 March [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>7</sup> E. Plumridge, "The Thwarted Career of Artist Edith Collier". *Comment*, No. 11, June 1980, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Charlie Ayliff to Edith Collier, 1 May 1964. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

The interpretation of Edith Collier's career and her contribution to New Zealand art has been largely in the hands of critics, at the time of her return to New Zealand, and, subsequently, of art historians. Operating some forty years apart, both art critics and art historians have assessed Edith Collier's significance as an artist, and found her an interesting but otherwise minor figure. With this as the overwhelming assessment of her contribution, what remains to be examined and, I think, exposed and rejected, are the authority systems, ideology and agendas which have made these conclusions possible. As Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock point out in their book, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, the history of art "is not the exercise of neutral 'objective' scholarship, but an ideological practice."<sup>9</sup> Fame and significance as an artist are constructed states, based on a biased value system, developed and utilised by those who hold power, and are ordained by that power to offer the 'dominant opinion'. This is used by the empowered group to endorse the careers of those participants whose life and work will serve to justify and promote the patriarchal system which fostered them. Accordingly, the reception of work, perceived reputation, and endurance of that reputation are political constructs, dictated by the manipulation of patriarchal interest groups and ideology. How a woman's work and career are assessed and valued often depends on how it might be used to build a case, to support and illuminate the considerably more illustrious careers of her male counterparts. While the male fraternity provides almost all the stars of the show, there are often some women numbered among the minor roles, and chorus.

If Edith Collier's role in the development and history of New Zealand art may be read as that of one of the minor players, it is necessary, from a feminist perspective, to look back and see how and why it has been constructed as such. This thesis, therefore, has two significant tasks, that of a re-evaluation of Edith Collier's contribution to New Zealand art history, and a reassessment of the impact of modernism on New Zealand, and particularly provincial Wanganui, in the 1920s. It will assert Edith Collier's significance as a New Zealand artist from the perspective that a painter existed in this country in the early 1920s with work that reflected the more radical innovations of British modernism and that she was publicly criticised, personally vandalised, and largely ignored because of it. In essence, it will argue that Edith Collier is an artist of enduring significance, and her importance needs to be re-written in the literature of New Zealand art history.

But, if this stands as the most forceful and compelling argument put forward in this thesis, to gain a complete picture of Edith Collier's contribution, the aspects of her life and career which

offer a contradictory, and perhaps in places more complex interpretation, will also be examined. The issue of Edith Collier's ambivalent commitment to experimentation must be acknowledged and understood. Certainly, Edith Collier experimented, but she also at times became indecisive and unsure of her commitment to innovation; sometimes she retreated, and from that point often took stock and experimented again. This is the pattern for much of Edith Collier's career while she lived abroad, and even to an extent after she returned to New Zealand. This can and, in fact, has been interpreted as an indication of a crisis of conviction and confidence, and as a lack of sustained maturity as an artist. And, while it is easier to overlook the inconsistencies in her British work because of her relatively constant commitment to the concept of innovation after 1915, because of the innate felicities of experimentation, and considering the haphazard and faltering manner in which she gained her knowledge, her apparent compromise in development after 1922, and the inconsistencies inherent in this are more difficult to dismiss. The episodic nature of Edith Collier's oeuvre, particularly after her return home, will be examined, as well as the contradictory arguments that Edith Collier did in fact receive a constant thread of support from family, friends, teachers, and significant admirers on the New Zealand art scene, and that far from giving up as an artist, she continued working, quite prolifically at times, for twenty years after her return.

Edith Collier's life spans a period of time in which stylistic changes in art, and, perhaps much more importantly, changes in Western cultural notions of the function of art, of its social purpose, and also of the role and the identity of the artist, have changed more rapidly and profoundly than in any other period of human history. In this thesis, it is against this framework, the framework of modernism (of modernity and innovation), that Edith Collier's achievements have been interpreted, assessed, and understood. While modernism, with its assumptions of progressive artistic development and innovation, is not the only theoretical or interpretive approach that could be applied to Edith Collier's work, it is this framework of ideas and assumptions which most closely relates to the intentions, drive and ambition of the artist herself.

Because modernism provides a pivotal point of discussion and analysis in this thesis, it is appropriate at this stage to provide an explanation of how this term has been interpreted and applied. Most importantly, it is the assumption of this thesis that modernism has a broad definition which incorporates a complex set of sometimes contradictory attitudes to art and modernity, and incorporates, but does not refer exclusively to, a specific set of stylistic

developments and innovations. It is equally the intention of this work that modernism should be understood, as Terry Smith contends, as a set of strategies which includes "[art] which provokes the shock of the new, to reveal the present as replete with blindingly self-evident value, and at the same instant, to consign the recent past to anachronism."<sup>10</sup> This thesis also holds to the argument that, in essence, a cornerstone of modernism must be its insistence on art's autonomy, with its promotion of the artist as a creative individual operating in a vacuum of obligation, and its associated advocacy of purity of expression, truth to materials, and abstraction as the ultimate achievement of all these motives. This thesis also contends that modernism, which had its origins in Europe, has become an international Westernising phenomenon since the 1920s, and that countries like New Zealand have responded to and assimilated modernist ideas, but according to their own unique set of values and priorities.

In fact, Edith Collier was one of the first New Zealand artists to arrive back in the country with modernist ideas about art. The construction of her reputation as a New Zealand artist began with critical assessment of the work she showed at exhibitions in the 1920s and 1930s, and although her art was stylistically advanced by New Zealand standards, there was every reason to expect that these innovations would be appreciated by critics, and possibly picked up by other painters. Despairing at the stagnant state of New Zealand art, critics had called for renewal and change; input and ideas from Britain and Europe would, it was hoped, bring about the necessary rejuvenation. In his review of the 1933 New Zealand Society of Arts, W. Basil Honour summed up the sentiments of many earlier critics:

It must be realised by those who are awake that the last twenty-five years or so have shown no appreciable expansion of the boundaries of art expression or art appreciation in New Zealand. In these matters we are a long way behind the other side of the world. With very few exceptions, our painters, both professional and amateur, continue monotonously working, "within their familiar experience". Year after year exhibitions reveal endless repetitions of ideas, techniques, motifs and effects."<sup>11</sup>

While W. Basil Honour was bemoaning the lack of innovation and freshness in New Zealand art, Edith Collier had earlier been ridiculed and dismissed for trying to introduce new ideas. In 1926, a Wanganui critic reacted with hostility to the Post-Impressionist elements in her work:

[Her] work suffers from a slavish imitation of a prevailing fad.... It is a pity that she goes out of her way to distort nature under a mistaken idea that that is the way to display originality.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Jane Turner ed., *The Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 21, London, 1996, p. 776.

<sup>11</sup> W. B. Honour, "New Zealand Society of Artists". *Art in New Zealand*, September 1933, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> "Arts Exhibition: A Preliminary Review". *Wanganui Chronicle*, 17 September 1926, p. 13.

If the severity of this judgement might be excused on the grounds that it merely reflects an isolated case of provincial bigotry, the critic in the Wellington daily, *The Evening Post*, though not as harsh, is similarly patronising. Edith Collier featured towards the end of a detailed review of the Annual Exhibition of the N. Z. A. F. A. in 1927:

E. M. Collier's name is attached to a well-drawn Sylvan subject, an Oak (124), and the same artist's old thatched stone cottages (50) has far more merit in it than its mere topographical interest. The same name will be found on what may be taken as an example of the latest direction taken by artists. It is "A Lady of Kent" (103), a picture of a nude girl stiffly posed, seated in a verdant and conventionally drawn setting, with Oast houses in the background.<sup>13</sup>

Thirty other works, out of a total of thirty-five, are discussed before *A Lady of Kent*, and of the eighteen artists mentioned in the article, twelve appear before Edith Collier. With this kind of response and ranking, it is little wonder that her commitment to innovation wavered.

While the innovations that Edith Collier's work presented in New Zealand in the 1920s and 1930s were consistently overlooked and underrated, another more prestigious and well-known figure was being identified as a front-runner in the Dominion's race for artistic renewal. Christopher Perkins,<sup>14</sup> a recent arrival brought out under the La Trobe Scheme,<sup>15</sup> was a bright star on the horizon, and his career and prospects obviously captured the minds and imagination of certain influential members of the art establishment. In a 1931 issue of *Art in New Zealand*, designed so that "readers throughout the Dominion may have the opportunity of looking on characteristic examples of Mr Perkins' work,"<sup>16</sup> P. W. Robertson wrote:

It would be to our shame, and make us trivial in the eyes of our descendants, if it were the legend that Christopher Perkins had come to our shores, but we had followed him with scorn and held no record of his passing.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *The Evening Post*, 16 September 1927, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> C. A. Marris, "Ourselves". *Art in New Zealand*, September 1931, Vol. 4, No. 13, p. 5. Christopher Perkins arrived in New Zealand in early March 1929 to take up his appointment under the La Trobe scheme as a teacher of art at the Wellington Technical College. At the welcoming function, given not long after his arrival, Perkins "promptly... propounded a theory on New Zealand art that soon became dogma and which has been revived in recent years." G. Docking, *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting*. Auckland, 1990, p. 124.

<sup>15</sup> In 1921 William La Trobe was appointed superintendent of Technical School Instruction for the Dominion. It was his task to re-organise technical education and improve the quality of staff employed in these institutions, and the schools of art. As Hamish Keith points out: "The most significant feature of La Trobe's programme was his scheme to improve the standard of teaching by recruiting practising painters from England to staff the New Zealand schools." H. Keith, *The Development of Art in New Zealand: A Series of Six Talks*. Auckland, 1969, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> C. A. Marris, "Ourselves". *Art in New Zealand*, September 1931, Vol. 4, No. 13, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> P. W. Robertson, "The Art of Christopher Perkins". *Art in New Zealand*, September 1931, Vol. 4, No. 13, p. 22.

High expectations on the part of the art world matched equally impressive claims made by the artist. Seeing himself as a latter-day cross between Gauguin, tourist of the exotic, and Robin Hood, saviour of the artistically impoverished, Christopher Perkins, in his reply to the Chairman of the Technical College in Wellington, "stress[ed] the need for a national art, based on a popular appreciation of art.... some motive force was needed, and he hoped, in time, to find that motive force and help in its development."<sup>18</sup> And just in case those listening, or reading the report in *Art in New Zealand*, were not completely impressed with the sacrifices and contribution Christopher Perkins had, and intended to make, he added:

From what I have already seen of this country... I hope to do my best work here, despite the fact that most of my artist friends warned me very strongly against coming to New Zealand, and deplored my decision to do so.<sup>19</sup>

Acting from a position of power and authority within the art world, Christopher Perkins knew he had a right to be heard as well as seen. His works were reproduced and discussed in successive issues of *Art in New Zealand*, his opinions were eagerly sought and reported, and his articles published. Critical attention was not given out evenly to men and women, and the consequences for their careers were similarly slanted. Prevailing opinion anticipated that innovation and renewal would come from specific individuals, operating from positions of prestige and power within the patriarchal system. British teachers on the La Trobe Scheme and expatriate male artists<sup>20</sup> were expected to be the leaders of a distinctive 'New Zealand art', influenced by modernism but possessing the special characteristics of its originating country.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Peter Tomory, Gil Docking, Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith<sup>21</sup> constructed historical surveys of New Zealand art which had a distinct bias and specific agenda. "From the 1930s until the 1960s, there was in New Zealand a self-conscious and explicitly-stated search for a national identity in painting and literature, a search for New Zealand subjects and a New Zealand style."<sup>22</sup> Influenced by this search, the writings of

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<sup>18</sup> "Art Notes: Wellington". *Art in New Zealand*, June 1929, Vol. 1, No. 4, p. 271.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 272.

<sup>20</sup> John Weeks, a New Zealand artist travelling abroad and returning in 1929, and R. N. Field, a La Trobe teacher, were received by artistic circles in New Zealand in a similar manner, and with similar expectations, to that of Christopher Perkins. R. N. Field's arrival in New Zealand in August 1925 was not announced to the New Zealand public in *Art in New Zealand* because it did not begin publication until 1928.

<sup>21</sup> These publications include: G. H. Brown and H. Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting: 1839-1980*, Auckland, 1988; G. H. Brown, *New Zealand Painting 1900-1920: Traditions and Departures*, Wellington, 1972; G. H. Brown, *New Zealand Painting, 1920-1940: Adaptation and Nationalism*, Wellington, 1975; G. H. Brown, *New Zealand Painting, 1940-1960: Conformity and Dissension*, Wellington, 1981; G. Docking, *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting*, Auckland, 1971; H. Keith, *The development of art in New Zealand: A Series of Six Talks*, Auckland, 1969; A. Tomory, H. Keith, and M. Young, *New Zealand Art: Painting 1827-1967*, Wellington, 1968.

<sup>22</sup> F. Pound, "The Real and the Unreal in New Zealand Painting". *Art New Zealand*, Spring 1982, No. 25, p. 42.

Tomory and more especially those of Brown and Keith constructed a New Zealand art history which was based on the concept that a national style had existed throughout the Dominion's past, and that this style was a bench-mark against which all artists' achievements might be measured. While some artistic careers were promoted because the artists were perceived as being "heroes of a truly national style",<sup>23</sup> other careers were automatically regarded as secondary to the primary concern of truth to the New Zealand landscape, and were correspondingly relegated to paragraph entries and footnotes. According to the advocates of national style, New Zealand was believed to have a 'real' landscape with 'real' qualities of light and atmosphere,<sup>24</sup> which in the hands of a truly perceptive artist would inevitably translate themselves into a style which could then be selectively traced back to the country's earliest topographical beginnings. As Francis Pound states:

In the written discourse, the largest and most powerful single performance of the harsh clarity theme is that of Gordon H. Brown and Hamish Keith's *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting*. The 'more important' painters in the body of their book are those who do seem so to respond to the 'distinctive qualities of New Zealand light', the less important are those who do not. So the period truths of 'the harsh clarity of New Zealand light', and of the absolute importance of landscape, and of freedom from the foreign, were used to establish which painters were true to New Zealand and which were not."<sup>25</sup>

Cutting the cloth to fit the pattern, careers were correspondingly written up according to how they fitted the 'national style' theory. Christopher Perkins, whose works, as Brown and Keith point out, "were widely seen and widely discussed", and who was also "an articulate writer and no doubt equally articulate... teacher",<sup>26</sup> was an obvious contender for retrospective attention. Although *Frozen Flames* (1931) was the only work by Christopher Perkins to remain in the country after his departure, and although it did not enter a public collection until 1962, Brown and Keith could still conclude that:

His influence, however, must have survived even if its immediate source was not acknowledged, for the qualities that mark his work are those that dominated New Zealand painting for the next twenty years.<sup>27</sup>

Many other stylistic and literary influences existed in New Zealand during the 1920s and 1930s, and to credit Christopher Perkins and his four-year sojourn in New Zealand with so much impact is to listen too closely to his claims, and not look dispassionately enough at the facts. As Ann Elias points out:

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<sup>23</sup>      ibid.

<sup>24</sup>      F. Pound, *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand*. Auckland, 1983, p. 11.

<sup>25</sup>      F. Pound, "The Words And The Art: New Zealand art criticism c. 1950 - c. 1990". *Headlands: Thinking Through New Zealand Art*, Sydney, 1992, p. 190.

<sup>26</sup>      G. H. Brown and H. Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting, 1839-1967*. Auckland, 1969, p. 128.

<sup>27</sup>      ibid.



There has been a tendency to attribute changes that took place in New Zealand landscape painting in the 30s to Christopher Perkins' arrival from England.... to attribute changes in New Zealand landscape painting solely to his arrival from overseas is to disregard the initiative shown by New Zealand artists before this. The ideas were present in the 20s, but were not fully realised until the 30s. Perkins' paintings were probably the catalyst.<sup>28</sup>

Although the issue of national style seems far removed from the creative output of Edith Collier, it is against this criterion that the significance of her work was assessed. In *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting: 1839-1980*, Brown and Keith take a mere five or six lines to deal with the work and contribution to New Zealand art of two expatriate women artists:

The career of Edith Marion Collier is not dissimilar to Mina Arndt's, for both studied overseas, returned to New Zealand, took an active part in local affairs, and were preoccupied with the human figure.... As a painter [Collier's] main interest was in portraiture, and while the quality of her work is uneven, a painting like "My Uncle" [cat. no. 355] gives a good idea of the standard she could at times attain.<sup>29</sup>

Because Edith Collier's painterly concerns did not correspond to Brown and Keith's overwhelming preoccupation with national style, they gave her efforts little attention. Even as late as 1980, Gordon Brown, writing this time for the *Edith Collier in Retrospect* exhibition catalogue, described her achievements in similarly limiting terms:

The paradox underlying the significance of Edith Collier's contribution to the visual arts is the expatriate nature of its visual references while that undertaken within her native land lacks that deeper artistic essence characteristic of her best overseas work. This factor has played against her acceptance as a significant figure in the current assessment of who has contributed to the development of New Zealand painting. Her subject references appear too English for the New Zealand consciousness.<sup>30</sup>

Edith Collier's lack of connection with the issue of national style has clearly had a significant impact on the subsequent construction by art historians of her reputation as a New Zealand artist. By not making, or claiming to make, any obvious contribution to advances in this area, Edith Collier's career has become frozen in a waste-land which has been given the title of 'expatriate experience', and is most often dealt with and dismissed in a few cursory sentences.

What must be identified here as pivotal factors in determining Edith Collier's realisation of her own personal artistic goals, however, or in any over-all assessment of her achievements after her return to New Zealand, are the socially constructed career components of expectation

<sup>28</sup> A. Elias, "Rata Lovell-Smith". M. A. Thesis, University of Auckland, 1979, p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> G. H. Brown and H. Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting, 1839-1980*. Auckland, 1988, p. 74.

<sup>30</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 21.

and exposure. The degree of anticipation and publicity surrounding the debut of Christopher Perkins' career stands in dramatic contrast to the very different experiences and social position occupied by Edith Collier. Public expectation and extensive critical exposure were denied her and this signalled a message both to the artist, Edith Collier herself, and to the wider art establishment; a message which, once internalised by the painter, limited her personal progress and, over time, marginalised her perceived position, ultimately distorting any true understanding of her contribution to New Zealand art. The disparity between Edith Collier's treatment and that given to Christopher Perkins points to the inherent imbalances in the opportunities and experiences offered to men and women working within the patriarchal system. Gender-based inequalities of critical exposure and expectation have worked subversively to privilege the careers of men, while they have prejudiced the chances of women. Inequalities in the position occupied by men and women in patriarchal society are correspondingly reflected in the concerns and constructions of that society's memory. If patriarchal culture "predisposes us to look only at certain kinds of art, to see only superstars, chosen by biased criteria",<sup>31</sup> then it is these superstars and these biases that have often dictated the way history is latterly constructed. Patriarchal nationalism, and its concern with national identity, and national style in painting and literature, is one bias which strongly influenced the thinking of art historians constructing survey histories of New Zealand art in the late 1960s. Although assessments of Edith Collier's contribution to New Zealand art may be accurate according to their patriarchal perspective and brief, it is this perspective and brief which must now be rejected.

Even art historians who have been perceptive enough to see some value in Edith Collier's contribution to New Zealand art history have tended to offer a rather simplistic interpretation of her life and achievements. It must be stated at the outset that any understanding of Edith Collier's life and oeuvre that summarises her achievements as a "tragedy of thwarted promise" and "failure",<sup>32</sup> as Elizabeth Plumridge asserts, or that the "quality of her work is uneven",<sup>33</sup> or that she "remained on the edge of achievement",<sup>34</sup> as Gordon Brown states, is fallacious. There are numerous works in Edith Collier's oeuvre which give testimony to the resolution of her ideas, and to her success as an early New Zealand modernist. If Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith have found it acceptable to proclaim Christopher Perkins' achievements in New Zealand art on the strength of a handful of promising works, then surely the same logic should be extended to Edith Collier. Christopher Perkins returned home to Britain and a career that

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31 R. Parker and G. Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women Art and Ideology*. London, 1981, p. 48.

32 E. Plumridge, "The Thwarted Career of Artist Edith Collier". *Comment*, No. 11, June 1980, p. 18.

33 G. Brown and H. Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting, 1839-1980*. Auckland, 1988, p. 74.

34 Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 21.

was equally thwarted, but this has not been used against him to diminish his New Zealand achievements. Surely Edith Collier's reputation should remain equally unaffected. Perhaps Edith Collier in different circumstances could have gone further with her work, but this certainly does not give permission to overlook what she did achieve.

The writing of a new history of Edith Collier's career and achievements has been made possible by thorough and comprehensive research. While the Sarjeant Gallery, Alexander Library and National Library in New Zealand, and the National Art Library, Witt Library, Women's Art Library, and Westminster Archives in London, and John Rylands Library in Manchester, provided a rich source of archival material for investigation, much new material was gained from personal papers and correspondence still in private collections. Extensive interviews with family members, and discussions with people living in Wanganui who remember the artist, also provided illuminating evidence and a fresh perspective on her life. This was further enhanced by interviews with residents of Bonmahon in Southern Ireland, who either remembered her stay in the town, or had parents who remembered her. The compilation of a comprehensive catalogue of all known works by Edith Collier offered a unique opportunity to view and record her extant oeuvre. Images from the Edith Marion Collier Loan Collection, the Sarjeant Gallery Collection, the National Art Gallery Collection, the Riddet Collection and thirty-four other private collections provided evidence about her life and work, her themes and innovations, and the relationship between her work and that of other significant artists, that has never before emerged. A fuller and more detailed understanding of the subject-matter of her British, Irish, and New Zealand work was gained from interviews with models, and by a comprehensive tour of many of the places she worked, including Westminster Abbey, St. Bartholomew's, her attic rooms at 5 Leinster Square, Oxford, Bibury, Manchester, St. Ives, and in New Zealand, family farms around Wanganui, Taihape, Waverley, Marton, and Eltham. Examination of works in Australian and New Zealand collections executed by Margaret Macpherson, Gladys Reynell and Frances Hodgkins while working with Edith Collier, provided yet another layer of information and understanding.

This research has offered solutions to problems in Edith Collier's biography that have existed for the last eighty years. It provides a new understanding of why Henry Collier burnt Edith's work and what impact this had on her career in New Zealand. It also places this personal tragedy in the context of the Wanganui and New Zealand art scenes, and suggests connections between this event and the impact of modernism in provincial centres and beyond, in the

1920s. These revelations inevitably suggest a more complex explanation for what happened to Edith Collier, than Elizabeth Plumridge's assertion that the "root cause for her failure was that she was a woman in New Zealand", and that it was "the sexism of society which forged the lock and turned the key."<sup>35</sup>

This thesis also adds to the understanding of Edith Collier as a person. Her career was initially propelled by the latent energy of the country's successful suffrage movement which brought the vote to New Zealand women in 1893. Edith Collier had the drive and ambition to turn this awakening consciousness of women's right to education and equality to suit her own purposes. For much of her career she was much less a "modest, retiring woman",<sup>36</sup> as Gordon Brown suggests, than an astute orchestrator of her own destiny. With today's assumption of freedoms and equality for women, it is easy to fall into the trap of underestimating, and even overlooking this achievement. Edith Collier was pushing the boundaries of what was considered appropriate for a woman to aspire to in her day. The degree to which Edith Collier was personally and psychologically emancipated has never been fully recognised. This thesis offers an analysis of the process of emancipation by which a young colonial woman like Edith Collier could construct and internalise an identity, sufficiently separate from the roles of daughter, wife and mother, to allow her to travel halfway around the world to study and produce art. Inevitably, the wider social change that made this process of identification with the role of artist possible for a woman, and a journey from a distant Dominion, 'Home', to Britain, generally acceptable, are also addressed.

This thesis demonstrates the significance to Edith Collier of the constant thread of female support which worked, first at home and then abroad, to maintain her self-esteem and commitment to her work. The networks of female friends, colleagues and tutors that operated in Britain, to teach and encourage her in her efforts to become a professional painter and teacher of art, were pivotal to the success of Edith Collier's career. Without the collaborative support of other sympathetic women artists, Edith Collier found herself alone and adrift in an antagonistic and cruel sea. Her oeuvre, her return to New Zealand, and the factors both public and private which led to her painting less, and later, to her almost ceasing to paint, are all aspects of Edith Collier's achievement and history which are given consideration here.

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<sup>35</sup> E. Plumridge, "The Thwarted Career of Artist Edith Collier". *Comment*, No. 11, June 1980, pp. 18, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 21.

Central to this thesis are new interpretations of the relationships between Edith Collier and her two teachers, Margaret Preston and Frances Hodgkins. They were influential in instilling in Edith Collier a concept of the woman artist as a serious minded professional in search of innovative ideas and personal development. Without these women as role models and mentors, it is unlikely that Edith Collier would have been capable intellectually and emotionally of making the journey she made. Although Edith Collier was certainly influenced by the contemporary art of her times, and this is certainly acknowledged and considered through this thesis, the ability to understand and make use of stimulating and new ideas came from the lessons and guidance of her teachers. Ultimately, what this thesis also offers is an understanding of how overseas art training affected the lives of Edith Collier and her contemporaries. While modernism and an expatriate career in Britain stopped Frances Hodgkins from returning home, it helped Margaret Preston to ensure that her return to Australia would signal the beginning of an even more successful phase of her life. Frances Hodgkins and Margaret Preston made different decisions, but the outcomes of their decisions were infinitely more positive than they were for Edith Collier and her friend Charlie Ayliff. An analysis of their varying decisions gives fascinating insights into the women themselves, and the way they related to the mores of their particular communities, and times.

This thesis will not seek to prove that Edith Collier created a 'school' that influenced volumes of students, or changed the course of art or art history for some specified period of time. Nor will this thesis see her as a "silent tragedy",<sup>37</sup> or as a person ever moving towards the goal of artistic maturity but always remaining on the edge of achievement. These constructs only blinker the vision, and obscure the richness of observation and insight possible when looking at the life and career of an artist like Edith Collier. What is central to this thesis is a record, analysis, and celebration of Edith Collier's personal journey as an artist. A journey which she diligently, if not doggedly pursued, and at a cost. Although Edith Collier chose to speak only sparingly for herself, the voices of others, the details of her life, the sheer modernity of her work, and the unique place she occupied in New Zealand art in the 1920s, are all true testimony to her achievements and ranking as an outstanding New Zealand artist.

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37      *ibid.*

## CHAPTER ONE

# Early Years in New Zealand: 1885-1912

Edith Collier's father, Henry Collier, migrated to New Zealand from Britain in 1877. As the oldest surviving son of a reasonably prosperous<sup>1</sup> cloth manufacturing family in Manchester, Henry came to the colonies in search of the kind of adventure and fortune that only a newly appropriated land could offer. An unsuccessful romance with his brother Frederic's future wife, Frances Lowe, has been cited by family sources<sup>2</sup> as the reason for his sudden departure from England, at age 25. Unable, with a family of nine children, to give Henry any significant financial support, his mother, Lydia Collier, allegedly presented her son "with a strong wooden club with many teeth to defend himself against the Maoris."<sup>3</sup> Arriving first in Christchurch, Henry soon shifted to the North Island where he heard that a Wanganui music teacher called Miss White was intending to sell her music connections. Although music had been no more than a compelling interest for him in Britain, in New Zealand it offered a way of life and much-needed income. Teaching both the piano and organ, Henry travelled by horse-back to tutor private pupils living in remote and difficult country, while also giving classes at Wanganui Collegiate School and the Wanganui Girls' College. In addition to the teaching responsibilities he assumed, Henry also bought a music importing business in partnership with his brother, Herbert Collier, which was then renamed "H. Collier & Co."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> By the time Henry Collier left Britain in 1877, the Collier family was reasonably prosperous; however, this had not always been the case. According to the unpublished Collier family history, *A Brief History of Our Collier Ancestors*, John Collier, Henry's father, had suffered a serious financial set back in 1864. "About 1860 trade was very good and Grandpa [John Collier] bought a nice house, a carriage and horses, and had a staff. But in 1864 disaster struck. He backed a friend who turned out to be dishonest and in order to meet the payment, Grandpa lost most of his fortune. About 28,000 English pounds.... It was necessary to sell the house, carriage, horses, dismiss the staff and retrench in all ways possible. They went to live in a small house called 'Clough Cottage' in Ringley." [n. p.] Although his father had gained much of his earlier wealth and position in the wholesale cloth industry by the time Henry Collier decided to leave Britain, it is likely that the memories of his family's precarious financial history stayed with him.

<sup>2</sup> *A Brief History of Our Collier Ancestors* states: "Another friend who joined their circle was Frances Lowe, evidently a very attractive girl. It has been handed down that four Collier boys and Armand Peltzer were in love with her and when she accepted Frederic this was the reason why Henry and Herbert decided to emigrate to New Zealand." n. p.

<sup>3</sup> This quotation comes from Dorothy Collier's essay, "The Collier Family Story", included in *A Brief History of Our Collier Ancestors*, n. p.

<sup>4</sup> "H. Collier & Co." was a music importing business established in Wanganui in 1875. Under the management and control of the Collier brothers, Henry and Herbert, the music business became so successful as a venture, that offices were opened in "New Plymouth... Fielding, Hawera, Taihape and Taumaranui. Info Mr Gordon Collier." *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 20. *A Brief History of Our Collier Ancestors* claims additional branches in Nelson, Palmerston North, Waitara and Stratford, and agencies in Dannevirke and Inglewood.

Lydia responded to her son, Henry's, already considerable work commitments and financial returns, and advised him about his future:

I should think you are very tired after your journey in the country to those schools teaching, what a distance you extend selling and teaching - I should think you are making money. Well! Harry when you have made it, (stick to it-) you will find as your family grow older expenses increase, education takes.<sup>5</sup>

While Henry's entrepreneurial background and training in the Manchester cloth-market ensured his competent management of his musical interests and business, it also gave him the speculative foresight to acquire large areas of rural farmland and bush-covered property. In 1890, he bought his first block of land on the Upper Turakina River in the Ringiwaea district, and from then on he bought land at regular intervals until his combined holdings made him a very substantial land owner. In February 1891 Lydia responded to the news of her son's first land purchase in New Zealand:

Mr Craig... [an acquaintance of Henry's in Wanganui who travelled to Britain] told us about everything including your land investment which I feel sure will be a success and what you will finally settle at, you will know, how you have always had a wish for farming now, I feel sure you will be happy... no doubt it will be hard uphill work for some time....<sup>6</sup>

Farming did, in fact, become his major source of income, and it was an enterprise that was to realise a great deal of capital and considerable assets for Henry himself, and the Collier family as a whole. Initially, Henry used managers and employed people to break in the land; eventually this job was taken over by Henry's sons and he in turn became their employer and paymaster. Farming became a vehicle for Henry's ambitious nature. One of his granddaughters, Patricia Lonsdale, remembers that:

Henry was obsessed with buying land. He had an ambition to shear 1,000 bales of wool [per year]. This would have been no mean feat taking into consideration that, per acre, there would have been less than half as many sheep as there are today. I understand he didn't quite reach this target but was very close. The depression of the late twenties and early thirties hit Henry hard and he had to dispose of some of his land, hence he missed his target.<sup>7</sup>

Henry met his future wife, Eliza Catherine Parkes as a piano student. A third generation Pakeha New Zealander, Eliza was born and educated in Wanganui. Her grandparents had immigrated to New Zealand from St. John's Wood, London, in 1840, and her father and brothers continued to run the original family farm of 250 acres on Kent Road, St. John's Hill. Brought up in a family where Maori was spoken fluently and cultural exchange was part of

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<sup>5</sup> Letter from Lydia Collier to Henry Collier, undated, 1886-1890 [?] Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Lydia Collier to Henry and Eliza Collier, 7 February 1891. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

the daily routine, Eliza was still, however, very much a product of her cultured Victorian upbringing, an upbringing restrained and restricted by pious notions of femininity. Eliza was trained in the arts, and when she met Henry Collier she was "taking painting lessons from a Wanganui resident, Mr Pownell, and later from Mr Sherriff or from Mrs Pratt."<sup>8</sup> Five watercolour landscapes by Eliza, produced, it would seem, in the late 1870s and 1880s, show a familiarity with the conventions of the topographical genre. Small in scale, and limited in their aspirations, these scenes demonstrate the degree of competence that would have been considered admirably lady-like, and appropriate to an amateur woman painter. The daughter of an established Wanganui land owner would no doubt have seemed a suitable match for a young ambitious immigrant from Manchester. On 18 December 1883, Eliza and Henry were married in Wanganui. The couple spent their honeymoon with Collier relatives in Melbourne, Australia, returning to New Zealand by way of Milford Sound. In spite of the early optimism among the Parkes and Collier families, the relationship between Eliza and Henry was soon to experience some real difficulties.

Henry was to be absent from the family a great deal in the future, spending no fewer than five years<sup>9</sup> in Britain, between 1885 and 1900, and much time attending to his business and farming responsibilities when he returned. Even the birth of his first child, Edith Marion Collier, on 28 March 1885, did little to disturb or delay Henry from pursuing his projects and ambitions. Making the first of a number of solo trips back to Britain when Edith Collier was just a few months old, Henry returned to Manchester in search of more musical expertise and training at the hands of a recognised master. Lydia sympathised with Eliza's situation, and wrote to her daughter-in-law from Britain in November 1885:

My dear Eliza, I shall be very pleased to hear how you and Baby are getting along without Harry [Henry], I think it very good of you to consent for him to be away so long. I should think it was rather unpleasant, having to break up house, but Harry, seems to think, it will be a future good. I heard from him a short time since, he seems to be fully occupied he told me what a nice baby Edith has grown.<sup>10</sup>

While Eliza may have seemed to her relations in Britain to be compliant with the reasons and arrangements relating to Henry's trip, their correspondence reveals a quite different situation.

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<sup>8</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, pp. 5-7.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Collier spent over a year in Britain studying music between 1885 and 1886, while *A Brief History of Our Collier Ancestors* [n. p.] records that: "Before leaving England in 1877 he [Henry Collier] and younger brother, Septimus John, collaborated in the invention of a two speed gear for bicycles. Septimus continued working on it after Henry's departure but in 1892 died as the result of an accident. Father, John Collier, was very anxious to have the work carried on and in about 1896 or 97 Henry returned to England for a period of five years and opened two shops, one in London and one in Manchester. Although the principal was good, it was too heavy and was never a great success."

Two of Edith Collier's nieces, Barbara Stewart and Joan Maher, and a sister-in-law, Hazel Collier, remembered hearing that Henry Collier had made more than one trip back to Britain. (Interview conducted on 18 May 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Lydia Collier to Eliza Collier, 23 November 1885. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.



"Dear Eliza," wrote Henry in November 1885, "the whole tone of your letter makes [sic] feel miserable I feel uncomfortable in being here you say that you are fretting just as much as when I went away - and that you have a feeling of disappointed love at what I have done, if I had thought you would have taken it so much to heart, I would not have come at all. Believe me I won't stay a minute longer than I can possibly help and as you wisely say it would be a pity to half do the thing while I am here and come such a long way for it too."<sup>11</sup>

In spite of Henry's assurances, his initial departure date was set back a number of times. Henry's apparent reluctance to return to his colonial home surprised and embarrassed even his own mother. Lydia wrote to Eliza in March 1886:

I don't know how you and Harry [Henry] understood each other before he came, but I never thought he would stop here so long.... I wrote to him a short time since asking him to let me know, when he was returning - he says he is very much improving and intends to turn it to account when he comes home. We all expressed our surprise at him leaving you and baby, thinking he knew enough to teach any one he would be required to teach, but he seemed to think it was for the best. I thought I would let you know, what I think. I often asked him about you, when he was at home and he said how good you were, so it is the (old adage it gets imposed upon). I saw the likeness of baby [Edith] you sent, she seems more like Harry, than you, she will be very nice company for you.<sup>12</sup>

On his return in August or September 1886, a relieved Lydia wrote to Eliza, saying:

... I am sure you would be very glad to see Harry [Henry], after his long journey and get settled in your own house, after being unsettled so long, but now I hear Harry, is going to Wellington so you will be unsettled again, I do sincerely hope he will be successful, as he seems determined to make money.... have you received the plaques that Edith [Lydia's daughter] painted, also baby's cup - safely. I was afraid Harry might loose it - he is always in such a hurry the last minute, no wonder Edith did not know her Papa, he would have been quite a stranger to her, no doubt.<sup>13</sup>

"He never shared his links in England with Eliza," recalls Patricia Lonsdale. "I can't be sure but I think he had more than one trip back to Britain after his immigration to New Zealand...." He was "rather more of an outsider during his life time, within the family I mean."<sup>14</sup>

Henry's arrival home must have been as traumatic for Edith Collier as it was long-awaited and looked for by Eliza. As the first child born to her parents, Edith Collier was the sole focus of

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Henry Collier to Eliza Collier, 1 November 1885. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui. In another letter written just two weeks earlier Henry Collier tells Eliza of his teachers and the lessons he is taking: "I am still under Mr Belinke for voice production he ranks very high as a teacher of this special branch in fact there is none more so, he has singers at the top of the tier consult him about their voices ... [and] Mr Beringer who I am taking lessons from on the piano.... Letter from Henry Collier to Eliza Collier, 22 October 1885. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from Lydia Collier to Eliza Collier, 13 March 1886. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Lydia Collier to Eliza Collier, 25 November 1886. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

her mother's attentions for a number of years and also greatly fussed over by the Collier family in Britain. Lydia wrote to Henry from Britain on 22 August 1886, and stated:

I calculate you will be just about home now.... I received a letter from Herbert [Henry's brother, living in New Zealand], last week, he tells me what a nice little girl Edith is, be sure to send a good likeness of her, one that I can show, as our colonial G-daughter.<sup>15</sup>

Lydia was eager to participate as a grandparent as much as distance would permit. In 1890, Henry's sister Ada wrote from Britain:

....perhaps in a few years you'll send Edith over to stay for some months. A little child near us has lately come over alone from N. Z. and it would be very nice for her to come and stay with the ancient aunts at Strand [Hall, where the family lived], wouldn't it?<sup>16</sup>

Edith Collier's unique position in the family was challenged soon after Henry's return by the arrival of a younger brother. Lydia wrote enthusiastically about the news of her New Zealand grandson:

I can well imagine how delighted Harry [Henry] will be with his son, I don't know how it is that boys should be made more fuss about than girls, but it is so, in fact all through life, men have all the advantages.... [and in addition to this] does Harry think it has improved his position his visit to England, I am glad to hear you like your new house, our new one is very comfortable, we were all very pleased with Edith's likeness she looks very bonny tell me when you write is she dark....<sup>17</sup>

The eldest child of a rapidly increasing family, Edith Collier was followed by "three boys, her immediate juniors and then a further six siblings... alternating girl with boy."<sup>18</sup> Housed ultimately in a spacious villa which underwent numerous additions and alterations to accommodate an ever growing family, the Collier family's homestead was located close to the Parkes property on St. John's Hill. Built on an area of land the size of a small farm, the grounds immediately surrounding 'Ringley' included a croquet lawn, tennis court, and extensive area of flower-beds and garden. Although this location and way of life might be perceived as idyllic, the demands on the time and energy of the family's female members would have been quite considerable. With Henry often away, or involved with his business and community concerns, domestic responsibilities and pressures were entirely shouldered, first by Eliza and then, by extension, by the eldest daughter, Edith Collier. Lydia wrote to Edith from Manchester in 1895, commenting, "I suppose you are quite a good little nurse for mother though I dare say you like playing the best."<sup>19</sup> Similarly a letter from Edith's other grandmother, Emma Parkes, in Fielding stated:

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Lydia Collier to Henry Collier, 22 August 1886. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Ada Collier to Henry Collier, 19 August 1890. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Lydia Collier to Eliza Collier, 21 January 1888. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>18</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Lydia Collier to Edith Collier, 26 August 1895. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

I suppose your time is taking [sic] up very much just now attending to your mother and little ones, it is nice for your mother to have you about, I know how my mother looked to me in her sickness, so dear Edith do all you can for them.<sup>20</sup>

Her Aunt Annie wrote from Fielding:

I often wonder what you are all doing up in Wanganui. I just want a nice little girl like you to stay with me and to keep me company while Uncle Harry is away at school.<sup>21</sup>

Edith Collier was required by her immediate and extended family to operate according to Victorian notions of femininity dictated largely by gender. As Raewyn Dalziel points out in her essay "The Colonial Helpmeet":

The frequent absence of colonial husbands placed [many] tasks squarely in the hands of women [Although, as a result of these absences, young girls and women were seen] as essential in a colony... they were not essential as individuals. Women were seen solely in the roles of [daughters] wives, mothers, homemakers and housekeepers.... Much as a middle-class wife [or daughter] was necessary in England as ornament, status symbol and angel in the house, she was infinitely more necessary in the colony because she was useful. The colonial woman's role was most frequently described as that of a true 'helpmeet'... [and] the eldest female [child in the] family, almost immediately began helping [her mother and] other women with baby-care.<sup>22</sup>

Edith Collier's emotional support and domestic assistance was most certainly needed during Henry's second trip to Britain in August 1896. Travelling to Manchester to assist his brother Arthur with the manufacture and marketing of a two-speed gear<sup>23</sup> for bicycles, Henry left his family in New Zealand for nearly five years, returning early in 1900. Lydia responded to Eliza's doubts about the gear, and stated:

I can quite understand your view on the gear, you don't know what it is to get the public here to take any thing up. I think Arthur has done very well the first season, he is very anxious and works hard. Ladies are taking them up with great spirit, the last letter I had from Edith [Lydia's daughter] she remarked she was just going for a "forty mile spin", I thought that pretty well. She wears an Eton jacket and divided skirt and gaiters, but has a loose skirt to put on if she get [sic] off the machine, you must read the London papers, it will be something for fashionable women to do that want exercise. No doubt you will have plenty without a machine.<sup>24</sup>

The 'Collier Two-Speed Gear' was a decided failure. Henry and Arthur were forced eventually to sell the business, realising only £1,200 for their very considerable efforts and expenses.

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<sup>20</sup> Letter from Emma Parkes to Edith Collier, undated, 1895-1900 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Annie Stewart to Edith Collier, undated, 1895-1900 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>22</sup> B. Brookes, C. Macdonald and M. Tennant eds., *Women in History: Essays on European Women in New Zealand*. Wellington, 1986, pp. 57, 59, 61.

<sup>23</sup> In a book which deals specifically with the history of the bicycle, Pryor Dodge states: "In 1889, Collier introduced a design for a two-speed bracket gear for the safeties that was to last for fourteen years. Other manufacturers followed with a variety of bracket designs. Ordinaries such as the Crypto-gear ordinary of 1891 used bracket gears in an attempt to continue the tradition of front driving bicycles amidst the growing popularity of rear-drive safeties. But the use of bracket gears on safeties was inevitable." P. Dodge, *The Bicycle*. Paris: New York, 1996, p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Lydia Collier to Eliza Collier, 31 June 1895. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

Although increased domestic demands and family commitments due to her father's frequent absences took up much of her time, Edith Collier still managed to pursue a course of study which began with "Mrs Holy's Infant School in Guyton Street, [and continued with] Miss Stedman's School and then Wanganui Girls' College."<sup>25</sup> Edith Collier excelled during these early years in drawing, painting and design. She and her parents were enthusiastic for her to continue with further specialised art training because of her talent and the prospect of future career opportunities. In 1903, she went to the Wanganui Technical School<sup>26</sup> to study art. At the Technical School, Edith Collier worked initially with Ivy Copeland and Miss Minnie Izett, and after 1909 had the additional tutorship of Dennis Seaward A. R. C. A. Her early student studies, produced during or shortly after her time at Technical School, reflect an obvious degree of competence. Exercises in still life (see cat. no. 54) and portraits (see cat. no. 46) are executed in sober tones with the then used darker palette, and have a subtlety of brush work and handling of light which reflects her increased experience. Edith Collier sat her first South Kensington<sup>27</sup> examination in 1909, obtaining a first-class pass in Model Drawing and second class pass in Memory Drawing of Plant Form. In 1912 she gained a second first class pass in Painting from Still Life. Her obvious success in what was for New Zealanders a benchmark British examination system confirmed her teachers' belief that she would benefit from further study abroad. Certainly, Edith Collier's work also caught the eye of a neighbour, Herbert Babbage,<sup>28</sup> who having recently returned from studies in Britain, was well aware of the benefits to a New Zealand painter of overseas training and experience. As "an enthusiastic

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<sup>25</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> "In 1891 the Wanganui Education Board... prepared a Petition to the Supreme Court seeking permission to use the funds of the Rees Estate (at this time £3,210) for the establishment and regulation of a "School of Design". The Petition was successful.... In 1896 the Government grant for technical instruction in New Zealand had increased to £1,424, of which Wanganui Technical School received £227.... During the years 1898-1900, however, progress was still very slow, causing the Board to complain that the public were not giving the support to the school that had been expected.... By 1902 there were signs of renewal and greater interest and from this date the success of the school was assured. Within the next three years several day classes were formed and three new rooms added...." L. J. B. Chapple and H. C. Veitch, *"Wanganui"*, Hawera, 1939, pp. 157-9.

<sup>27</sup> The South Kensington examination was a British examination available to Commonwealth students and administered through the Department of Education in New Zealand. This system enabled art students like Edith Collier to apply for assessment in specific subject areas. The examination was sat in New Zealand and the work sent over to Britain to be marked. Schools of design like the Wanganui Technical School were modelled on South Kensington, which after the reforms of Henry Cole followed "a course of severe practicality" (M. Argles, *South Kensington to Robbins*, London, 1964, p. 25), so it is not surprising that the British examination was used as a formal system of assessment for New Zealand students. A successful result in the examination was considered an impressive achievement in New Zealand.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert Ivan Babbage (1875-1916) was born in Adelaide, but educated largely in Wanganui. Una Platts states that he "Studied at Wanganui Technical College and worked as a pupil teacher under the painter D. E. Hutton 1899-1904. In 1904 [he] went to Europe: Studied in London and at the Julian Academy, Paris. On his return about 1909, held one man shows in Wellington, Wanganui and New Plymouth." Herbert Babbage met and encouraged Edith Collier during his second stay in Wanganui. He then returned to Europe and served in World War One, and is believed to have died of exposure while on sentry duty. It is highly unlikely that Edith Collier and Herbert Babbage met again while they were in Britain, even though they both worked on occasions at St. Ives. U. Platts, *Nineteenth Century New Zealand Artist: A Guide and Handbook*. Christchurch, 1980, p. 28.

admirer of Edith Collier's talent... [he] strongly encouraged her decision to continue her studies in London."<sup>29</sup>

It is important to identify, at this point, the pre-conditions both private and public which made Edith Collier's decision to study abroad possible. Edith Collier, like many "young ladies being groomed for society at the turn of the century",<sup>30</sup> was encouraged in art and music from an early age. While she learned the cello and played chamber music in a family quartet led and instructed by her father, it is evident that the majority of her art education occurred beyond the domestic setting. By acquiring skills and recognition in the formal context of the education and examination systems, Edith Collier raised what in previous generations would have been regarded as a womanly 'accomplishment' to the status of potential career. In 1910, Emily Davis, a friend of Edith Collier's, wrote:

I received your welcome letter some time ago, you will be thinking I am never going to answer it, better late than never. I suppose your time is taken up considerably with your painting, I suppose at the end of the year your course of tuition will cease [sic] as I understand your term was for two years, I shall be interested to hear of your having an appointment of some kind.<sup>31</sup>

Because of changing attitudes to women brought about by the suffrage movement, from the 1890s on, the possibility was certainly there for a woman like Edith Collier to combine an accomplishment like painting with the nurturing skills already acquired as part of the female role, to become a teacher of art. By the end of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of middle-class daughters in New Zealand were receiving an education that prepared them for paid work, and were working in the public sphere for several years before marriage. Mary Colclough, a colonial feminist and advocate of women's education, had pointed out in a letter to the *Daily Southern Cross* (Auckland) as early as January 1871:

It [is] absurd to talk of educating women purely for the domestic sphere.... Many would remain single and need to support themselves; many more would be widowed or married to improvident husbands. The remedy [lies] in making women self-reliant and self-helpful.<sup>32</sup>

Much of this change in social thinking came about because of the increased political awareness of New Zealand women resulting from the suffrage and temperance campaigns. Margaret Sievwright wrote in 1896 of the emergence of a utopian breed of woman who was "the new woman, child as she is, of the great bloodless, sometimes even wordless, revolt of the century, must be, is already becoming, will yet be triumphantly acknowledged the

<sup>29</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> A. Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*. Auckland, 1986, p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Emily Davis to Edith Collier, 7 August 1910. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in B. Brookes, C. Macdonald and M. Tennant eds., *Women in History, Essays on European Women in New Zealand*. Wellington, 1986, p. 79.

deliverer of her sex. The new woman is she who has discovered herself - not relatively as mother, wife, sister, but absolutely."<sup>33</sup> New expectations of equality and fulfilment for women brought gradual improvements in educational opportunities and changes in social attitudes and policy, which ultimately allowed for the acceptance of the concept of middle-class women having careers.<sup>34</sup>

Involvement in the public sphere did not in itself, however, free young women from restrictive notions of femininity. The ideal 'modern' young woman represented more of an adaptation than a repudiation of traditional values and attitudes to the female sex in this country. Eliza, like many colonial mothers, was ever vigilant that her daughters should conform to society's definition of femininity. She wrote to twenty-year-old daughter Edith, while she was staying in Wellington:

... tell them you enjoyed your visit, in a lady like manner hoping you will leave a good impression behind you everywhere which is something to be cultivated as well as the Fine Arts.<sup>35</sup>

Using her power over her daughter, Eliza continued to control the whereabouts and behaviour of her children (especially her female children) well into their adult years. Having been forced to run her house and raise her children largely alone, Eliza was reluctant to relinquish power in these areas. She believed that if her daughter chose to see herself as an artist, she was to see herself as a 'woman' artist; the responsibilities of being a woman equalling, if not superseding, those of being an artist. Edith Collier was controlled by notions of correctness, and the family's need for her support and labour, and it must have been very difficult for her to see herself as an independent agent, acting as a separate identity in the world.

A career as a teacher of art was seen as a positive option by many of the Collier family. Edith's Aunt Annie wrote:

You will be leaving College soon and then you can come any time. But I suppose you will be thinking of doing something for a living. It is a grand thing to be independent and I think it right for girls as well as boys to earn their own living, one never knows what may turn up. You might be left a widow with a

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<sup>33</sup> M. Lovell-Smith. *The Woman Question: Writings by the Women Who Won the Vote*. Auckland, 1992, p. 119.

<sup>34</sup> Margaret Lovell-Smith writes: "If the work of the women's movement in the 1890s could be summed up in one word, that word would be 'education'. By their writing and speaking, their meetings and their resolutions, the women attempted to change attitudes and introduce new ideas.... A belief in temperance... was also shared by most of the feminists of the 1890s. Indeed it was the temperance movement which nurtured the feminist movement, as Patricia Grimshaw has explained in *Women's Suffrage in New Zealand* [p. 25]: 'the drink question... aroused a feminist response for at its base lay a real element in the subjection of woman. It was often a wife who suffered at the hands of a drunken husband, yet she had virtually no legal redress in a society with unequal divorce laws, where the duty of a woman to subject herself to her husband was still widely upheld.'" *The Woman Question: Writings by the Women Who Won the Vote*. (Auckland, 1992, pp. 25-6)

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 6 August 1905. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

family to provide for (of course you will be getting Married) and then you could take to your old work again.<sup>36</sup>

It was hoped that a career in teaching would act as a type of social security, providing an unmarried woman like Edith Collier with a suitable role and income. Once she decided to marry, however, she was required, by custom and some in cases by law, to stop working and her career then became an insurance policy to secure her against destitution through abandonment or the death of her partner. Marriage remained a woman's ultimate and ideal career, and there was considerable pressure to make this a concrete reality. Although it was generally considered an appropriate precaution for a middle-class woman to have a career, then, there was still much anticipation and excitement over the prospect of Edith Collier's marrying. Her Aunt Muriel [Parkes] wrote to Edith who was in her early twenties:

Well have you a "bloke" yet: or are you engaged?? Perhaps your father would lend you the car for the honeymoon so do hurry and get married.<sup>37</sup>

Marriage does not, however, seem to have been Edith Collier's choice of 'ultimate career'. Remembering her aunt's lack of desire to marry, Patricia Lonsdale says:

I certainly do not agree that Edith would have liked to have been married and had a family. She did more than help bring up her own sisters and brothers and then it all started again with the big families that her sister and brothers had. No I am quite certain about this.... Outside of her brothers, men made Edith nervous. She had two hates, men and Tom cats! Perhaps "hate" is too strong a word, maybe disdain or dislike sounds better. She loved cats but they had to be either female or spayed.<sup>38</sup>

Men, marriage and child-rearing meant ties and social obligations that would put an end to any thought of personal fulfilment or self-expression, and it is unlikely that Edith Collier made her decision to remain unmarried without this in mind. Having stood on the sidelines of her own parents' marriage, and seen the difficult time that her mother had had, there is little chance of Edith Collier being naive about the fuller implications and consequences of marriage. In spite of the fact that in the opening decades of the twentieth century, "women who remained unmarried and perhaps lived with other women were generally assumed to have suffered a fate not of their fault - to have been overlooked by men seeking wives"<sup>39</sup> choices like this were regularly made by women, and it seems likely that Edith Collier's decision to remain outside the restrictive demands of marriage allowed her to make her subsequent decision to study abroad.

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<sup>36</sup> Letter from Annie Stewart to Edith Collier, undated, 1900-1902 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Muriel Parkes to Edith Collier, undated, 1905-1910 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

<sup>39</sup> S. Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940*. Texas, 1986, p. 54.

In place of men and marriage Edith Collier chose the company of women friends. While she made a number of close associations at the Technical School, Edith also had firm family friends who had known her since her early childhood. From painting with women, socialising with women, and generally taking women as her closest companions, Edith Collier gained much encouragement and momentum to work. Of one of her many painting excursions, a friend wrote (1910):

Your studies at the technical school must keep you busy. I should think that sketching from nature must be very interesting. Minna told me of an intended visit you and she and another friend were to pay to Kai Iwi. I suppose it came off. I think Minna said you were especially good at seascapes. You would enjoy the breakers at Lyall Bay. It is about ten minutes walk from here. After and during the southerly gale we like going down there to enjoy the lovely big white waves. At the end of the bay there are some rocks and the waves are just glorious as they break on these rocks. The last few days we have had keen southerlies and the bay has been well worth seeing. Do you ever draw the animals at your Zoo? They always seem to get into funny positions when one wants especially to observe them.<sup>40</sup>

Edith Collier and many of her female companions such as Minna and Olive Russell, Katie and Annie C. Finlayson, Bella Livingston, Muriel F. Harrison and Emily Davis saw themselves as forming an allied group, distinct from, if not fundamentally opposed to, men. There was a consciousness amongst the women of Edith Collier's circle that men's and women's interests often worked antagonistically, and that men's self-confidence was a matter for amusement, distaste or disgust. Muriel, a close friend of Edith Collier's, wrote to the artist after leaving Wanganui to live permanently in Petone:

Is that little picture you are to draw for me on the way yet?... Just fancy the Welshmen beating the New Zealanders at football. I am sorry the spell of good luck is broken but expect it would never do if they came back without one loss, they would be that dreadfully conceited. Does not take much to puff a man up with conceit.<sup>41</sup>

While another friend asked, "Is there a law passed in Wanganui as you suggested, that men should not be allowed out at night?"<sup>42</sup>

Edith Collier and her female friends who chose to remain independent were not alone in their negative feelings towards men and marriage. In the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many women were beginning to look for avenues of self-fulfilment other than those conventionally offered and vicariously experienced through the roles of wife and mother. Art was one avenue which did seem to offer colonial women possibilities for professional credibility and status during the 1890s and opening decades of the twentieth

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<sup>40</sup> Letter from Katie Finlayson to Edith Collier, 19 June 1910. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Muriel [?] to Edith Collier, undated, 1910-1912 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Kate Finlayson [?] to Edith Collier, undated, 1912 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.



century. Not wishing to be a drain on family finances, these women were seeking incomes in work that would not compromise their social status. European experience and training was, however, considered essential for any artist with aspirations to a professional position within the Dominion's art scene; so women as well as men left, eager to participate in the vibrant artistic art milieu of Britain and the continent. "So soon as our promising young art students arrive at a period when their productions can not only please us, but make us proud of their proficiency, they leave our shores to seek a wider scope for their budding ambitions, and a more competent school than we could possibly offer",<sup>43</sup> a writer for the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* noted in July 1900. According to Hamish Keith,

New Zealand in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century had nothing at all to offer young painters with any serious intentions about their art. Their exodus was inevitable - possibly as a retreat from the cloying sentimentality of late colonial art or more probably as a devout pilgrimage to its source."<sup>44</sup>

Many women then left New Zealand for overseas training in the hope that this would be viewed as a significant act of commitment to their chosen career of artist. Within their patriarchal home and family, these women were often dependents, and were correspondingly treated as such by the local institutions they attended outside the private sphere. As Anne Kirker points out,

the apparent broadening of horizons for women to develop their artistic potential did not automatically ensure that they would be accepted as professionals. For women, art school was often seen as a sort of finishing academy or training ground to equip them as teachers, but hardly as the beginning of a serious painting career.<sup>45</sup>

The independent gesture of a woman leaving family connections and friends to travel many thousands of miles to study abroad was one which would have been regarded in New Zealand as a serious and considered step in the direction of professionalism. Women artists with pretensions to professional status hoped that if gender made their aspirations doubtful, then possibly the prestige and authority of knowledge acquired in Europe, might, on their return, increase their visibility as an artist and promote their future prospects.

Women artists left New Zealand to study overseas, hoping to realise their ambitions in a way not possible for those who remained in colonial centres vastly distant from the history and cultural opportunities of Britain and Europe. Although the opportunities for an art education in New Zealand had greatly increased during the later part of the nineteenth century, the art schools, art galleries, and art societies which developed during this period were very much

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43 Quoted in A. Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*. Auckland, 1986, p. 35.

44 H. Keith, *The Development of New Zealand Art: A series of six talks*. Auckland, 1969, p. 9.

45 A. Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*. Auckland, 1986, p. 19.

limited by the capital and experience available. While some women artists saw their overseas studies as a chance to further inform and refine skills and perspectives already acquired in New Zealand, others saw overseas travel and training as an opportunity to expose themselves to new ideas and innovations in their field. The artist Frances Hodgkins, reflecting on her reasons for leaving New Zealand, and stated:

Before I left New Zealand, I had painted a great deal, done a lot of teaching, and had illustrated for our newspaper.... Perhaps I ought to have been content with what was an interesting life, but I felt I was only groping; that I had not realised myself; that I wanted to see the masterpieces of all time; learn what was being done in my chosen medium, and measure myself with the moderns. So I sailed for the old world.<sup>46</sup>

The desire for innovation in art would, at that time, inevitably need to be fed abroad. The role of art in the Dominion was still very much prescribed by Victorian notions of morality. Art must elevate and instruct, it was to "preach and teach, to warn and encourage, to tell stories and record events."<sup>47</sup> Like the critic for the *Otago Daily Times* (1906), most colonial New Zealanders would have agreed that:

The educative value of a public collection of paintings by artists of renown is incontestable and great and... no modern city can justly claim to have provided adequately for the instruction and elevation of its inhabitants which does not make the sight of good pictures and the sound of good music accessible to them.<sup>48</sup>

Advances in higher education, hygiene and opportunities for athletic prowess in New Zealand in the nineteenth century created a breed of New Women artists, who had new ambitions, wanted to live new lives, and pursue new types of relationships. Coming almost exclusively from well-to-do middle class families, these New Women artists had the financial resources to take advantage of all that a colonial art education could offer, and then travel abroad. Parental consent for such a venture was often more forthcoming than might be expected. A young lady's overseas experience, her trip 'Home', had a snob value which acted to separate the families who had wealth and status from those who did not. A trip to Britain would, it was hoped, extend a young colonial woman's peculiarly antipodean perspective of the world, acting, in part, as her initiation into adult life. The educational and cultural experiences expatriate women were expected to pursue were correspondingly broad. Music lessons, concerts, plays, religious speakers and services, art exhibitions, and trips to manorial homes and landscaped gardens all numbered amongst the cultural touch-stones of any successful trip 'Home'. If a young woman failed to marry while abroad, her breadth of experience would certainly put her in a good position to do so when she returned.

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted in G. C. Docking, *Two Hundred Years of New Zealand Painting*. Auckland, 1990, p. 96.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in G. H. Brown, *New Zealand Painting 1900-1920: Traditions and Departures*. Wellington, 1972, p. 21.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p.17.

With the decision to study art in London made, Edith Collier proceeded to make her arrangements for her trip to Britain. Finding the necessary companion for the journey was a matter conveniently resolved. Mary Frazer, a woman considerably younger than Edith Collier, going to study music in London was recommended to the artist and her family as an obvious choice. Margaret Frazer wrote a number of letters to encourage, if not cajole Edith Collier to act as Mary's chaperone. Ironically, on the point of being freed at last from the responsibilities of caring for eight brothers and sisters, Edith Collier was once more pressured into taking charge of another younger person's safety and well-being. After some debate between Mary Frazer's parents and their family doctor over which route to Britain would be least taxing on their daughter's delicate health, Margaret Frazer wrote to Edith Collier:

I thought I would write to you this time and explain our reasons for wishing Mary to go by the direct line of steamers.

In the first place she [Mary] does not stand the heat very well - and although that would be the best season for Suez I rather dreaded risking it- We decided however that before sending you an answer we would ask Dr Fitzgerald's opinion as he had been both ways and would know what was best for Mary - Mr Frazer saw him today and he advised us not to let her go by the orient line on account of the heat. He said that although it is the coolest time for Suez the heat in Melbourne at that season would be too much for her if she had to stay there even for a day or two.<sup>49</sup>

Having made up their minds on behalf of their daughter and her proposed companion, the Frazers set about the immediate arrangements:

Mr Frazer went to Dunedin last Tuesday and booked the berths. Cook's agent said he would secure the very best two berth cabin available.... We are not sure yet where Mary will be staying in London.... I am hoping that you will at least be somewhere near each other.... If you are out of London sketching during Mary's summer vacation I should like her to go with you if possible - It would be delightful to see something of beautiful England. A young lady who had several trips home told me that it was very pretty about Twickenham in summer.... Now that the berths are booked I am beginning to realise that she is really going. We shall miss her sadly, but we are doing it for the best, and I somehow fancy that you will both find good friends at Home. The present High Commissioner Mr T. Mackenzie is an old friend of Mr Frazer's and I am sure he will be only too pleased to give you both help or advice at any time if you require it.<sup>50</sup>

Edith Collier and Mary Frazer travelled aboard the New Zealand Shipping Company boat, the 'Turakina', which departed on 6 February 1913. The Frazer parents' concern for their daughter's health as she travelled through the tropics no doubt paled into insignificance when they heard that the 'Turakina' had caught fire with those aboard being forced to abandon ship, and put ashore in Rio de Janeiro. Shaken but otherwise unharmed, the passengers of the

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<sup>49</sup> Letter from Margaret Frazer to Edith Collier, 28 October 1912. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Margaret Frazer to Edith Collier, 10 November 1912. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

'Turakina' reboarded the 'S. S. Vaban', which reached Britain in March 1913. Although 9 March is given for Edith's enrolment at St. John's Wood Art School,<sup>51</sup> a restaurant menu card from the 'S. S. Vaban' is dated 20 March. Whatever the finer details of the timing may be, it seems that Edith Collier, despite her unexpected adventures at sea, arrived with little delay and enrolled promptly at St. John's Wood School of Art.

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<sup>51</sup> Janet Paul, writing for the *Edith Collier in Retrospect* (Wanganui, 1980, p. 7) catalogue, states that: "The delays must have heightened Edith's determination to work; by 9 March 1913 she had enrolled at St. John's Wood School of Art." Janet Paul's source for this date is a St. John's Wood Art School student identification card, dated 9 March 1913, and signed by Edith Collier.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Art Student in London: 1912-1914

The art world which Edith Collier encountered in Britain was vastly different from that she had known in New Zealand. The place her family and friends had referred to as 'Home' bore no resemblance to anything she had known in Wanganui. The city of London was much bigger, and the opportunities greater and networks more complex, than anything that could possibly have developed in the Dominion. In a letter written some time after her arrival, Edith Collier wrote:

I don't know what I would have done if Aikens hadn't been in London at first; you could live your life in a house and never know the people in the next room.<sup>1</sup>

London was impersonal, and highly equivocal in what it might offer a 27-year-old woman from New Zealand. If Edith Collier had come to London in search of a wealth of opportunities and experiences, she would soon find out that it was a wealth already largely allocated, most often in terms of social connection and gender.

Many women in a similar position to Edith Collier came to London at this time seeking an art education at one of the increasing number of schools. The most prestigious option still remained the Royal Academy. The Academy Schools, however, were well known as unfriendly places for female art students, who were subject to on-going inequalities of opportunity based on sex. The Slade School of Fine Arts, founded as a co-educational college in 1871,<sup>2</sup> offered women students a second, and more equitable art education. The Slade was

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1915-1916[?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. The 'Aikens' mentioned in this letter appear to be family friends or contacts living in London. Edith Collier must have maintained a significant connection with the family as there are a number of references to, and correspondence from, the Aikens. On the 22 July 1913, Edith Collier received a postcard from A. Aiken stating: "We will be going to Scotland about Thursday will we see you there? I hope so! Don't work too hard. There's lots of time." Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>2</sup> The first principal of the Slade, Edward Poynter, stated in his inaugural address of 2 October 1871: "There is unfortunately a difficulty which has always stood in the way of female students acquiring that thorough knowledge of the figure which is essential to the production of work of a high class; and that is, of course, that they are debarred from the same complete study of the model that is open to the male students.... But I have always been anxious to institute a class where the half-draped model might be studied...." Quoted in P. Gerrish Nunn's *Victorian Women Artist's*. London, 1987, p. 52.

felt to have "an enlightened attitude to women students and as a result many women artists were successful at the school and later achieved professional recognition."<sup>3</sup> However, even in an institution as open to women's education as the Slade, perennial issues of inequality continued to present themselves. There were few women tutors, and the attitude of members of the teaching staff to female students reflected an inherently sexist approach to women and women's work.

In addition to the Academy Schools and the Slade, there was a mass of smaller colleges and art schools offering a wide variety of curricula and subject areas, responding to the skills or accomplishments required by those attending. Some institutions were intended as artistic finishing schools for genteel young women, while others had practical connections with the Arts and Crafts Movement, and were established to train men and women alike in fields such as textile and ceramic design, weaving and embroidery, metalwork and the making of jewellery, illustration and numerous other areas of artistic endeavour. St. John's Wood Art School was typical of a number of colleges intended to cater for the modestly ambitious children of well-to-do middle class families, who might hope to gain a position teaching art, or possibly pursue a low-key professional career as an artist. According to Stuart MacDonald's *History and Philosophy of Art Education*, "St. John's Wood School of Art was the last outpost of the tight and highly stippled drawing favoured by the Academy.... From the eighties until the first decade of this century, pupils at the 'Wood' were particularly successful in obtaining entrance to the R. A. Schools."<sup>4</sup> Offering a conventional grounding in painting and design, St. John's Wood provided a sound art education without, as many parents feared, introducing its female pupils to hedonistic art circles, or bohemian concepts of the artistic persona or way of life. Gluck (Hannah Gluckenstein), who attended St. John's Wood at the same time as Edith Collier, was angry at the way she was perceived and treated by the school, and wrote:

[I] was enrolled at St. John's Wood Art School as conveniently near my home. Stayed in the Antique section, then one day bored and frustrated took my easel without permission into the Life Class. No protests were made because the Principals of the school were not interested in me I presume because they thought as the child of well-off parents I would remain an amateur / amaturess. As far as I was concerned there was nothing taught that could be considered 'training'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> T. Grimes, J. Collins, and O. Baddeley, *Five Women Painters*. Oxford, 1989, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart MacDonald, *History and Philosophy of Art Education*. London, 1970, p. 34

<sup>5</sup> This quotation comes from a 5 page hand-out entitled *Biographical Details*, which Gluck supplied to The Fine Art Society, London, for their retrospective show of work in 1973. Gluck's *Biographical Details* were also used by Diana Souhami in her book *Gluck 1895-1878: Her Biography*, (London, 1988, p. 37), in which she writes of Gluck's parents and St. John's Wood Art School: "... the principals of the Art School took scant notice of her on the understanding that rich girls dabbled with art before they became rich wives."

Just prior to Edith Collier's arrival in Britain, the attention of the gallery-going public and art critics and writers turned to a group of artists who debunked the conventional teaching they had received at the hands of academically trained tutors. Numbered amongst this privileged artistic and intellectual set was Vanessa Bell, who was instrumental in establishing the Friday Club in 1905. Seeing a need for the discussion and exhibition of art, separate from those channels offered by the Academy and the New English Art Club, Vanessa Bell encouraged her friends and colleagues to attend informal gatherings at her home. One of the key figures on the English art scene whom Vanessa Bell interested in Bloomsbury and the Friday Club was the painter, art critic and art historian, Roger Fry. In 1906 he had taken up a position as European adviser to the Metropolitan Museum of New York, and by 1908 had returned to Britain and was causing a degree of public disturbance over his promotion of what he considered to be the 'Modern Masters' of art: "With his appearance on the scene, Bloomsbury greatly expanded its contacts and its interests, becoming a definite social and intellectual force in the years before the First World War."<sup>6</sup> If Vanessa Bell had wished her social milieu to be a driving force for change in British art, then she could not have chosen a better connection, or future figure-head, than Roger Fry. In 1910, at the age of forty-four, Roger Fry's involvement in the on-going debate regarding the continuity and credibility of modern art took a new and more emphatic direction. Intending to create as much impact as possible, Fry, after being made "adviser to the Grafton Gallery company",<sup>7</sup> staged the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition,<sup>8</sup> which ran from 8 November 1910 to 15 January 1911. Achieving what has been described as a "succès de scandale",<sup>9</sup> Roger Fry gained all the publicity, both negative as well as positive, that he could have desired. As Virginia Woolf explained, in her book *Roger Fry: A Biography*:

There can be no doubt about the fact. The public in 1910 was thrown into paroxysms of rage and laughter. They went from Cézanne to Gauguin and from Gauguin to Van Gogh, they went from Picasso to Signac, and from Dérain to Friesz, and they were infuriated. One great lady asked to have her name removed from the committee. One gentleman, according to Desmond Mac Carthy, laughed so loud at Cézanne's portrait of his wife that he had to be taken out and walked up and down in the fresh air for five minutes.<sup>10</sup>

Roger Fry greatly enjoyed the outrageous comments of the press, and stream of controversial letters published in papers and journals. The results of the First Post-Impressionist exhibition certainly pleased those immediately concerned. Almost all the lower-priced paintings were

<sup>6</sup> R. Shone, *Bloomsbury Portraits: Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and their Circle*. London, 1993, p. 36.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Roger Fry to William Rothenstein, 26 March, 1911. Quoted in *Letters of Roger Fry*, Vol. 1. London, 1972, p. 344.

<sup>8</sup> At the First Post-Impressionist Show held at the Grafton Gallery, "There were eight oils and one pastel by Manet, 21 pictures by Cézanne, 20 by Van Gogh and no fewer than 37 by Gauguin. In addition, there were nine Vlamincks, two Maurice Denises, three Déraïns, three Frieszs, six Rouaults and two Picassos." *Letters of Roger Fry*, Vol. 1. London, 1972, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> C. Bell, *Art: The Classical Manifesto on Art, Society and Aesthetics*. London, 1987, p. XXIII.

<sup>10</sup> V. Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*. London, 1940, p.153.

sold, and a profit of £277 declared.<sup>11</sup> The attendance records for the gallery were more than satisfactory, and Roger Fry found himself a celebrity almost over-night. As Virginia Woolf outlined:

The exhibition shut, and the hubbub calmed down. But the excitement remained. It had left a trail behind it.... He was asked to dine, to lecture, to address this or that art society in the provinces or at the universities. Everybody was writing to him, either to express their views or to ask him to explain their own.<sup>12</sup>

As unofficial spokesperson for the Post-Impressionist movement in Britain, Roger Fry's place in the Edwardian art scene was guaranteed.

Fry's Second Post-Impressionist exhibition, which opened in October 1912 and ran for an extended period, closing in January 1913, was similarly successful. The catalogue to the second exhibition stated that the newer event "differs somewhat from that of two years ago. Then the main object was to show the work of the 'Old Masters' of the new movement.... Now the idea has been to show it in its contemporary development. Not only in France, its native place, but in England where it is of recent growth, and in Russia where it has liberated and revived the old native tradition."<sup>13</sup> As well as including the work of painters both British and Russian, the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition also included within its ranks the work of two women painters, Vanessa Bell and Jessie Etchells. These were out of a total of fifty artists. Thus while the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition excluded women entirely, the Second Exhibition made scarcely a token gesture in the direction of women's creativity. No concerted effort was made to consider the work of female practitioners, and the two women who were invited to participate were personally, as well as professionally, connected to Roger Fry. Innovative perhaps in terms of the art they displayed, the Post-Impressionist Exhibitions were in other ways then highly conventional. Reflecting traditionally sexist notions about the worth of women's art, the work displayed at the Post-Impressionist Exhibitions was chosen as usual from the male club, who in turn then publicised, discussed, bought, and assessed its value in terms of its impact on British art. In effect, attitudes to women's art had changed very little.

Edith Collier arrived in London in the wake of the two Post-Impressionist Exhibitions, her steamer sailing up the Thames just weeks after the doors shut on Roger Fry's second show. However, although there was much discussion of these events in artistic circles, she would

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<sup>11</sup> The figure of £277 is quoted in Mary Ann Caws' book, *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa and Carrington*. (New York, 1990, p. 11.) "Vanessa bothered, in 1911, for instance, that Roger Fry made £277 by the huge success of his Post-Impressionist Show, while she could barely pay a bill for £26".

<sup>12</sup> V. Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography*. London, 1940, p. 162.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.* p. 177.



have had little opportunity to view Post-Impressionist paintings or analyse their implications for her own work for at least another two years. While the London art scene struggled to come to terms with Bloomsbury's English translation of European modernism, Edith Collier struggled to come to terms with life as a student in a new city. Once in London, she enrolled at St. John's Wood Art School, and made arrangements to stay during term time at Queen Alexandra House, Kensington Grove. The prospectus for the women's hostel stated:

Queen Alexandra's House has been built in order to provide, at a moderate cost: A home for Female Students attending the Royal College of Music, of Science and Art classes in South Kensington. [In addition].... The fees will be sixty guineas per annum. There must be no singing or noise at any time on the staircase, or in the halls or corridors of the House.<sup>14</sup>

Alexandra House offered Edith Collier an opportunity to meet other women students with similar backgrounds and ambitions. Socialising and spending time together, they were able to develop friendships, and networks of information, support and social connections that were to influence their lives while they were in London, and beyond. Eliza realised the importance for Edith of this companionship:

I am glad you have met some nice girls from the "Queen Alexandra Hostel". I would like you to stay there it would be much brighter for you then you could have music in the evenings, don't give up your Cello playing, and don't be painting at night give it a rest.<sup>15</sup>

Edith Collier's experiences in Britain provoked wistful comments from her friend Minna Russell at Wanganui:

I expect you have quite a number of girl friends in England, tell me about them when you write again. It is easy to make friends when you work together I think.<sup>16</sup>

Around this time Edith Collier established a firm friendship, which lasted throughout her life, with a South African-born artist called Charlie Ayliff. Enrolled at St. John's Wood along with Edith Collier, Charlie Ayliff was to assume a progressively prominent place in Edith's affections. They spent their vacation time together at well-known sites of beauty or interest, and in a letter to her parents, Edith Collier writes, "Miss Ayliff and I are going to share a studio 5/- a week."<sup>17</sup> While some friends encouraged and supported Edith Collier's interest in art, others supported her commitment to music. In a note left for the artist, presumably at Alexander House, a friend from St. John's Wood wrote:

Do you remember that you said you would like to go to Mrs Newcombe's concert. Well, I had the tickets all ready, and then couldn't find them anywhere. I was so sorry and you must have thought it rude. When

<sup>14</sup> *Queen Alexandra House* [pamphlet]. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 16 July 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Minna Russell to Edith Collier, 15 April [1914-1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 23 December [1913-1914 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

shall I see you. Come and see me tomorrow afternoon if you can I have to go to tennis about 4, but you can come with me.... It is ages since we have had a "duet", we'll be getting rusty.<sup>18</sup>

Transported to a new city, country, and set of social acquaintances, Edith Collier integrated the serious life of the student with that of the sightseer, and visited historic places, landscaped gardens, churches, concerts, museums and art galleries. She maintained contact with her travelling companion Mary Frazer, and they saw a number of London's significant cultural landmarks together. Aware of her friend's youthfulness and her correspondingly greater opportunities to travel and learn, Edith Collier wrote to her mother Eliza:

Mary Frazer was here Thursday to see me she is getting on well lucky kid to come over so young, she is coming here Sunday too and we are going to Westminster Abbey & Tate Gallery. Love to all.<sup>19</sup>

As well as visiting well-known places of interest, once she was familiar with London and the greater British transport system, Edith Collier extended the range of her travels to include more obscure locations and buildings in and around Edale, Manchester, and Scotland. Communicating her interest in what she saw, often on a picture postcard, Edith Collier went to considerable lengths to share her excitement and enthusiasm for Britain with her family in New Zealand:

We are out all day till about eight o' clock in the evening. It is raining hard today so that's the end of sketching for today. This church is 900 years old they have a very good preacher down here. To get into the gallery of this church you go up a stair case outside of the building. Last Sunday I went for a long bike ride to see another old church over 1000 years old, but it was closed....<sup>20</sup>  
[And in a postcard to her sister Dolly, she writes] This place with a tower used to be a jail outside there a [sic] chains or joughs [sic] they used to fasten them round the women's necks to stop them from talking - hard on them wasn't it?<sup>21</sup>

Because of her own religious affiliation, Edith Collier acted on the recommendation of friends and relatives at home, going to hear a number of well-known preachers and philanthropists in London at the time. Following the specific instructions of her childhood friend Annie C. Finlayson, to "hear some of the great preachers in London, such as Silvester Horne and Mr R. Campbell and Mr Campbell Morgan and the Bishop of London",<sup>22</sup> Edith Collier attended a

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Ethel [?] to Edith Collier, undated, 1913-1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>20</sup> Postcard from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, undated, 1913-1914 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>21</sup> Postcard from Edith Collier to Dorothy Collier, undated, 1913-1914 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Annie C. Finlayson to Edith Collier, undated, 1913-1914 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

number of significant lay and ecclesiastical addresses. Briefly describing two such occasions in a notebook, she commented:

Oct 4th Went to Alexandra House like it very much my partner is Miss Roberts a musical student.

Nov 8 Sunday Went to St. Paul's in the morning didn't like it couldn't hear the sermon the suffragettes were there made a commotion.

Went down to Kent to Mrs Strout's enjoyed myself very much country beautiful down there. Stayed from Saturday till Tuesday. Went to Guild Hall with Miss Ayliff. Went to hear Dr Broughton on Sunday with Ayliff he told us how he started a home for poor working girls.<sup>23</sup>

Although Edith Collier was unsympathetic towards suffragette disruption of a religious service, this did not deter her from attending a number of other sermons given by Dr Campbell Morgan, and inviting Mary Frazer, at least once, to accompany her. The Collier family read Edith Collier's letters before circulating them amongst a wider circle of friends and acquaintances. "There is always great excitement when your letters arrive of course they go the rounds of the family, and all my friends wish to hear the news,"<sup>24</sup>.... "I am going to Mrs Seaward's tomorrow she has invited me down, so I will show her the syllabus [sic] you have sent they will know something about "St. John's School". I will tell you next letter what they say about it,"<sup>25</sup> wrote her mother Eliza, eager to benefit socially by involving as many people as possible in the prestigious events of her daughter's overseas stay.

Although Eliza and Henry enjoyed the reflected glory that news of Edith Collier's exploits and achievements gave them within their community, on a personal level they were not completely happy with the type of information supplied by their daughter. Eliza wrote:

What a grand time you are having, we would be very pleased if you would only go into details more than you do. Tell us everything about themselves [the Collier relations in Britain] and how they received you, and are they tall or short; fair or dark, Father was very disappointed, he wanted to know all about them, but you didn't describe a little bit. Try and cultivate this and make us enjoy what you are enjoying.<sup>26</sup>

Seeing Edith Collier as their envoy in Britain, Eliza and Henry believed that it was as much their daughter's responsibility to provide information about family members as it was to describe her activities as a student and sightseer. They were paying for the privilege of having their daughter abroad, and therefore felt that their own expectations should be met. A subsequent letter from Eliza confirmed Edith Collier's effort to accommodate her parent's wishes:

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<sup>23</sup> Edith Collier's notebook. Although the year is not given for any of Edith Collier's notebook entries, it is likely that this entry was made in 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 4 June 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 16 July 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 10 June 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

....so you had a good time with your washing and mending. This is the sort of news I like to hear, I am glad you didn't get spoiled at your rich relations house, it is a great mistake to bring children up, however well off, to do no work, how they will feel it if they happen to make a poor match.<sup>27</sup>

By providing her mother with the onerous details of daily tasks, Edith Collier reassured her mother both that she was still actively involved with traditional female roles and skills, and that she was not being spoilt by exposure to new ideas and affluence.

On the other hand Edith Collier's letters were also a reminder to family members that they were not part of her world; a world which no doubt would have seemed more fascinating and prestigious than their own. Edith Collier's discoveries, her joys, challenges and achievements stood as a bench mark against which members of the family could measure their own daily routine. Eliza herself, denied any personal experience of Britain, must have felt the deficit deeply. While she responded to her daughter's experiences in a supportive manner, there was also a note of sadness for her own unfulfilled ambitions and dreams:

I felt quite envious when I read your account of the motor drive round Eastborne, and to see the Thames lit up at night....<sup>28</sup>

And she compared her own life with that of Edith, and stated:

You will be having Summer weather now and everything will be looking very beautiful what a treat it must be to see all those lovely gardens you mention, and picture galleries, quite an education for you. Well! I suppose I must be contented and be satisfied with a little rose bed that I am almost begging for and get what pleasure there is to be got from it.<sup>29</sup>

Some of Edith Collier's sisters and brothers appear to have felt equally marginal and in awe of her experiences. Her brother Frank wrote:

By all accounts you seem to be having a great time, and I suppose you are not troubling much with slab dabbling yet. I am up at the Station [family farm] now, or have been for the last two months. I like it very much.... At present we are putting up a telephone line to Matai Tera, (that is another of our stations) and by jove it is hard work. We generally walk to work and I can tell you, we generally feel a bit tired when we come trudging home in the dark with wet feet. It is far different to walking on the pavements in a London street.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the tensions which existed amongst members of the Collier family in relation to Edith, there was a basic pride in her achievements and a belief that one day she might be a great painter. Reflecting this attitude, Frank concluded the letter above with:

Well Edith I hope London boys suit you alright [sic], and that it won't be very many month [sic] or years before you paint some famous picture which will be a credit to the Collier family.

27 Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 9 July 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

28 Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 16 July 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

29 Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 9 July 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

30 Letter from Frank Collier to Edith Collier, 6 July 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Free from the responsibilities and restraints of family life, but always aware that the time to return home to New Zealand might arrive more quickly than she hoped, Edith Collier appears to have made the most of every opportunity to learn, work or travel that arose:

When is a letter coming from you [Reg] bank manager. Some very nice girls in this House [Alexandra House]. I am doing quite a lot of sketches of London. I am just in full swing now never had such a time in my life working all the time, funny old stick aren't I. Love from Ed."<sup>31</sup>

At liberty to create with as much concerted effort as she pleased, Edith Collier experienced a new energy and enthusiasm for her work. Painting and sketching around London initially, she did not hesitate to gain fresh experience and material from centres and sites beyond this primary location. As Janet Paul points out:

[Edith Collier] was already travelling with painter friends in the first summer vacation. A notebook in Edith's hand writing refers to a holiday in Scotland in August which must also have been in 1913.<sup>32</sup>

Edith Collier visited and worked in Scotland and parts of the south of England, all in her first year abroad. Leonard Walker, a teacher of art associated with St. John's Wood, was involved in leading some of the painting and sketching excursions in which Edith Collier participated during this period. As well as organising trips to Scotland and Oxford, Walker also provided Edith Collier with advice and instruction about her work. He advised his New Zealand student by letter about the type of exercises she should do in preparation for her practical art examinations:

... do a pastel and water colour of a peice [sic] of drapery a pot (if you could borrow one) a stuffed bird or buy a rabbit with its skin on, it is always something like this they give. Miss S had a hedgehog -....<sup>33</sup>

In spite of the formal emphasis on still life at St. John's Wood, Edith Collier's first painting executed in Britain (see cat. no. 61 ) shows her obvious interest in the English countryside. This painting and its companion piece (see cat. no. 62) illustrate a greater level of sophistication in their treatment than her earlier New Zealand landscapes which are small in scale, often rather naive in composition, and tentative in their application of paint. It is obvious from these works that the teaching she was receiving at St. John's Wood was already improving her skills in this genre.

<sup>31</sup> Postcard from Edith Collier to Reg Collier, undated, 1913 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>32</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Leonard Walker to Edith Collier, 19 November [1913 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

During this time, Edith Collier was orientating herself to the art world in London, moving cautiously and conservatively along artistic avenues which were relatively familiar to her from her experiences in New Zealand. The academic painting that she had known and admired in Wanganui was what she sought out in London. She first exhibited her own work in Britain at the St. John's Wood Art School Sketch Club in December 1913. According to the rules laid down by the Art School, "every student joining the School [was] expected to become a member of the St. John's Wood Art School Sketch Club, which has the benefit of criticisms from Honourable visitors."<sup>34</sup> The Sketch Club, as a group, then worked towards exhibitions which were held for "Past and Present" members of the School. Edith Collier included six works<sup>35</sup> in her first Sketch Club exhibition, two of them not for sale. Her subjects included tree studies, a *Village Street* scene, paintings of *Kew* and *Kew Bridge*, and an imaginative piece entitled *The Land of Nod*. Her work was conservatively priced, with *Royal Oaks* at £5.5.0 being her most expensive painting. There is no record or indication of how well her work sold. The exhibition catalogue purchased by Edith Collier indicates her interest in the work of a number of fellow students. In the catalogue which remained in her possession, Edith Collier underlined the names of her friend Miss Ayliff, and Miss de Gray (another student with whom she was to maintain a close relationship) as well as Miss Horsfield, Miss Sidney Percey, Miss Margaret P. Walker, Miss Kathleen R. Cuff, and Mr Adrian Hill.

Exhibiting a considerable body of work just nine or ten months after her arrival, Edith Collier was clearly eager to gain as much benefit from her art studies as possible. The adjustment to working in a London art school did not, however, come without its anxieties and stress which were evidently communicated to Eliza, who responded:

Your very welcome letters arrived all together 3 in number. They were very interesting telling all about your work in St. John's Wood School, but you mustn't be in such distress about money matters you have gone to get the best you can, so that you will have nothing to regret when you return. Were you very nervous when you went to interview the professors? You say you were very shaky in your first lesson at the Life Class. I'm glad you have separate rooms, from those long haired artists you mustn't laugh at their peculiarities though. I dare say you will be picking up some of their odd customs before long.<sup>36</sup>

Conservatively raised and educated, Edith Collier must have found the explicit nudity of the Life Class hard to adjust to. In addition to this, nervous and unsure of her position and abilities, she faced new teachers, new levels of expectation, and a somewhat conservative version of a new breed of unconventional artist. The 'long-haired male artists', housed

<sup>34</sup> *St. John's Wood Sketch Club*, [pamphlet]. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>35</sup> Janet Paul claims that Edith Collier entered eight works in her first St. John's Wood Sketch Club exhibition, however, there are only six works listed in the exhibition catalogue.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 16 July 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

conveniently in another room, may well have provided Edith Collier with her first insight into a liberal model of the artistic persona.

Byam Shaw has provided a description of the drawing class at St. John's Wood: "The big "Antique" room was packed with girl and boy students, with the usual sprinkling of elderly folk, the girls outnumbered the boys by ten to one. Silence was the order, and we were given printed rules for observation. One, I think, ran thus: "Talking between male and female students is not allowed except in the rests, and then only on matters relating to art...."<sup>37</sup> He commented on the addition to the school programme of a life model, and stated, "The innovation of a life-model was a great event. We trooped in and began our drawings with stump-chalk and plumb-line, as we had been taught over the Antique casts! Soon charcoal found more favour, and led to charcoal smeared, and worked over with a dry brush."

Although drawing from the life model had become an established part of the curriculum by the time Edith Collier arrived at St. John's Wood, the rules relating to student conduct and the school's very conservative approach to drawing remained unchanged. Like many students entering the St. John's Wood Life Class, Edith Collier was aware of the importance of the nude as a signifier of artistic skill and status in western art. The numerous weighty anatomy books purchased by the artist at this time testify to her commitment to rendering the human form as accurately and traditionally as possible.<sup>38</sup> While the impact of the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions had already inspired such artists as Duncan Grant to radically distorted the female nude (*The Tub*, 1912), Edith Collier, by contrast, was just beginning the task of learning to draw the nude according to the conventions of academic realism.

In spite of her initial anxiety, Edith Collier's Life Class studies display an impressive level of competence and accuracy. The standing male nude figures (see cat. nos. 102-105) are carefully drawn and clearly fulfil their purpose of familiarising the artist with the anatomical features of the human body. Devised to test a student's skill at rendering the foreshortened or twisted, turning form, these studies show how competently Edith Collier could meet the challenge. The female figure (see cat. no. 127), more lyrical in its positioning than the male nudes, illustrates the subtlety of Edith's handling of light as it reveals the female form. Significantly, once Edith Collier left art school, her commitment to rendering the male nude subsided, while some of her finest mature work was conceived in response to the female nude. Without a doubt, Edith Collier's early training at St. John's Wood gave her an interest in the

<sup>37</sup> Rex Vicat Cole, *The Art and Life of Byam Shaw*. London, Seeley Service & Co., 1932, pp. 23-25

<sup>38</sup> Edith Collier's anatomical books include *Anatomical Diagrams for the Use of Art Students* (1912) by James M. Dunlop A. R. A. C. and *Modelling: A Guide for Teachers and Students Vol. III* (1911) by E. D. Lanteri.

subject matter, and put her in a good position to continue developing her approach to the female nude as her skills evolved and her ideas changed.

Edith Collier pursued her studies at St. John's Wood sitting examinations at regular intervals throughout her time at School, with the idea that she might one day become a teacher of art herself:

I am going up to Uncle Fred's tomorrow for Xmas. Coming back on the 3rd Jan. for those lectures. I have just heard tonight that I got through all the Practical Teaching Examination of subjects. I got excellent for 4 only, a very good for the rest! so that is good. The lectures take about a month and then more exams.<sup>39</sup>

While the practical component of the St. John's course was obviously important, theory examinations related to methods of teaching art were also part of the requirement for those who intended to go on and teach. In an examination paper set by the Royal Drawing Society, which Edith Collier sat on 5 September 1913, candidates were expected to respond to questions such as:

1. What do you know of the natural observation by children of the objects in the world around them? In what ways do their spontaneous drawings record this?
8. Why should an art teacher or teacher of drawing be very expert in methods of teaching? What is the special value of collective teaching?<sup>40</sup>

Although Edith Collier saw her possible future employment as that of a teacher of children and younger students, she certainly realised the limitations of this goal. As she wrote to her mother some two or three years later:

I am going up for the last exam at the beginning of May.... I will be able to call myself a teacher then... of course it means nothing as far as art goes.<sup>41</sup>

While Edith Collier was pursuing courses to become a qualified teacher, she was increasingly disillusioned with the quality of the tutorship she was receiving herself. Disappointed with the nature and calibre of criticism available at St. John's Wood, Edith Collier wrote to her parents from Bonmahon:

Those great men who used to come and give a crit. at St. John's didn't criticise you [sic] own work but the school as a whole, and they didn't stay longer than could be helped. I saw on the syllabus Amsbury [sic]

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<sup>39</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 23 December [1913-1914 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>40</sup> I am grateful to Barbara Stewart for providing me with a copy of this examination paper.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 10 April [1916 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.



Brown Landscape critic that decided me, but to my disappointment he only looked in once a year. He has just been made an R. A.<sup>42</sup>

Feeling cheated by promises unfulfilled, Edith Collier was soon looking for new directions and additional tutorship, and considering some of the most prestigious possibilities:

The great man at the Academy this year is Clausen - wouldn't I like a few lessons from him none of these great people seem to teach he did that picture *Waiting at the Gate* that girl is his daughter. Sergeant [sic] who mostly paints portraits (did that picture called *Carnation, Lily Lily Rose*) well he said he wouldn't paint more portraits of society. Since the war he said he would do a portrait for some thousands and give it for Red Cross an American lady is getting her portrait done.<sup>43</sup>

Frustrated by the lack of constructive criticism from competent and well-known artistic identities, Edith Collier was to find a solution to her problem in the person of Margaret Macpherson. Edith Collier met Margaret Macpherson, either through her St. John's Wood affiliation, or possibly at a Society of Women Painters exhibition,<sup>44</sup> and was quickly convinced that the Australian had more to offer than the majority of tutors she had worked with so far. Although it is not known precisely when they met, it is certain that they established an acquaintance and working relationship by August 1914. According to a notebook entry by Edith Collier, in "August [she] came over to Ireland with Miss Reynell."<sup>45</sup> Edith Collier and Gladys Reynell were travelling together in 1914, which means that Collier and Macpherson were already acquainted. Edith Collier's involvement, as a private pupil of Margaret Macpherson's, over-lapped her time at St. John's Wood, but was to become even more significant after she left the art institution in c. 1916.

Required to vacate Alexandra House for "ten days at Christmas time and for six weeks from the 1st of August",<sup>46</sup> Edith Collier spent much of this time, when she was not travelling and painting with friends, with her extended family in Manchester. Staying with her father's brother and sister-in-law, Frederic and Frances, Edith Collier was able from 1913 to establish a close association with her younger cousin, Fannie.<sup>47</sup> Edith Collier recognised and greatly

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Sir John Alfred Arnesby Brown (1866-1955) was a landscape painter in oils who often featured cattle in his work. He was elected A. R. A. in 1903, and R. A. in 1915, as Edith Collier mentions.

<sup>43</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. 'Clausen' is the British painter Sir George Clausen (1852-1944). He was known particularly for his landscapes and figure studies in oil and watercolour.

<sup>44</sup> In correspondence with Janet Paul, Dorothy Collier wrote: "Miss Macpherson took a great interest in Edith from the first. Probably met at Women's Exhibition [Society of Women Painters]." Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>45</sup> Edith Collier's notebook. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>46</sup> *Queen Alexandra House* [pamphlet]. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>47</sup> In correspondence between Janet Paul and Dorothy Collier, Dorothy describes an incident relating to her cousin, Fannie Collier. "Fannie was the first woman to study economics at Manchester University," she states, "The young men were not too pleased at a woman teaching economics. As she was going down the stairs to the basement where the library was, there were two young men who looked very forbidding. Fannie missed her foot step and fell down the stairs. The two forbidding young men were all concerned and ran forward saying, "Oh Miss Collier" and helping her to rise. Fannie said I have just come for a look. Got it and went upstairs again. The opposition were all friendly after that." Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

admired her cousin's intellectual skills and achievements, as a postcard to her sister Dorothy showed:

Thanks very much for your nice long letter written from Grandma's. Fannie is a splendid writer [sic] isn't she. She went to the University in Manchester for 3 years and studied Economics and some other subjects. She is clever but not a bit proud of herself. So you needn't be frightened of her, she is very interested in you N. Z. people.<sup>48</sup>

Edith Collier's high regard for Fannie was well justified. When she completed her pencil portrait of Fannie (see cat. no. 170) in c. 1914, her subject was already a talented student of economics at the University of Manchester, and was to go on to gain her M. A. in 1920,<sup>49</sup> and in the same year a junior lectureship with the faculty of Economics and Social Studies at the same university. Fannie's involvement in the very active Women's Suffrage Movement in Manchester was the motivating factor for her interest in economics. An obituary in the *Manchester Guardian* recorded that:

she early became interested in the Suffragette Movement; it was indeed her curiosity as to the effect which the granting of the vote to women might have upon the level of women's wages which first led her to take up the study of economics at Manchester University. Not having then matriculated she could not proceed in the normal way to a degree, but Professor (later Sir) Sydney Chapman recognised her worth, and in 1907 she was allowed to join classes which were small but which did not lack excitement."<sup>50</sup>

Fannie introduced her cousin to her university set, and to her friends and acquaintances who were active participants in the women's suffrage movement.<sup>51</sup>

A committed participant in the women's movement, as Janet Paul points out, it is likely that Fannie gave Edith Collier "some interest in British politics and made her, later in 1914, aware of the strength of the aversion to the suffragette movement when Fannie was mistaken for Mrs

48 Postcard from Edith Collier to Dorothy Collier, undated, 1914 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

49 "In 1920 she was awarded the M. A. by thesis alone, for a study of the standard of living of wage earners in Lancashire in the first half of the nineteenth century. This was a valuable piece of research. At the time it did not perhaps arouse the interest which its quality merited, but quite recently scholars have gone back to it and it is shortly to be published." "Obituary to Miss Fannie Collier", *Manchester Guardian*, September 1962. Quoted in *A Brief History of Our Collier Ancestors*, n. p. Fannie Collier's thesis was subsequently published in 1968 by the Manchester University Press as *The Family Economy of the Working Classes in the Cotton Industry 1784-1833*, edited by R. S. Fitton.

50 "Obituary to Miss Fannie Collier", *Manchester Guardian*, September 1962. Quoted in *A Brief History of Our Collier Ancestors*, n. p.

51 Although Fannie was a strong advocate of women's education and their right to vote, she had many personal misgivings about her own abilities and right to an academic career. In a letter to Edith Collier's brother Harry, she wrote: "I'm going to embark on a "career". It sounds vast and it's only a very humble beginning.... I commence to give a course at University 4 terms of lectures in Economics - 20 in all. I've never done anything of the kind and never dreamt of using my college work and it will be a ghastly ordeal for me... I may get quite a respectable income in any case this year I shall be able to dress myself and keep my tram fares going!.... If you knew how frightened I am you wd be sorry for me!.... I am the humblest of little "bottle washers" but still it is very exciting to do anything; the good man [Fannie's supervisor at University] thinks I have "capacity" - and I pray I have Altho never did anyone feel more a fraud! However I am embarked and I've got to go through!.... You know really I'm a humbug - if those folks who will listen to me lecturing only knew that washing up and cleaning down is really my work they wdnt pay much attention to my wise words!" Letter from Fannie Collier to Harry Collier, 25 July 1915. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

Pankhurst at the National Gallery and was taken away from the shocked Edith Collier in a police van."<sup>52</sup> Although Edith Collier's personal involvement in the women's suffrage movement is hard to ascertain with any certainty, the suffragist's sash amongst her belongings when she returned to New Zealand, and her attendance at suffragette meetings with Fannie, suggest that her sympathies became definitely feminist. Remembering Edith Collier's views in relation to women's rights and suffrage, Patricia Lonsdale writes:

There is a smallish painting which she did in London at a suffragette meeting in which her cousin Fannie took part and she was witness. Edith was very supportive of this and although at the time of our discussion I did not have the strong ideas that I have today, I knew that she was very passionate about it. I think all this, plus her own life of looking after others' children made her belligerent towards men as she felt they should control themselves more with regards to sex and large families.<sup>53</sup>

Subscribing to the *Humanity* magazine from its first printing in May 1913, Edith Collier made an attempt while in Britain to transform her feminist leanings into practical assistance for women. The Christian *Humanity* magazine concerned itself with the issue of the Emancipation of Sweated Female Labour and was intended to educate middle-and-upper-class people about the plight of working-class women; knowledge and awareness, it was hoped, would lead to improvements. Eliza, who shared her daughter's concerns about working-class women in Britain, wrote to her in June 1914:

I have had the honour of getting a letter from Countess of Strafford asking for help to send the poor of London to the country for a week, so you see I am greatly honoured. I subscribe to Society of Emancipation of Sweated Girls and Women. So this is how it came about.<sup>54</sup>

Edith Collier appears to have decided to contribute to the journal herself, without knowing that she was following her mother's example. While Eliza's reasons for her involvement in the magazine were strictly Christian and philanthropic, Edith Collier's motives probably came from her feminist sympathies as well as religious conviction and humanitarian concern. She understood the injustices and deprivations which working-class girls and women faced in Britain, and made an effort to improve the way of life of some of the females that she met. Working in conjunction with her mother to place English girls in domestic positions in the Dominion, Edith Collier attempted to give a few individuals the opportunity to live and work in New Zealand. Concerned about matters of placement, Eliza wrote to Edith Collier and stated:

I forgot to mention about the girl from Mrs Proctors in my last letter, that I would be willing to take her at 15/s if you think she is worth that, but I would rather she brought a friend with her, as she might get home sick. Aunt Mary is losing Miss Henry next month she is to be married, so that she will be wanting

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<sup>52</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993. Although the subject matter of this painting (cat. no 314) is suggestive of a suffrage meeting, it is, in fact, a painting of people gathering outside the Ministry of Labour recruiting office for women.

<sup>54</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 23 June 1914. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

someone, but she couldn't give such high wages. Perhaps other good girls would come later if they knew of some where to go. I don't mind helping to find places for them if they are good industrious and not fast girls.<sup>55</sup>

By finding jobs for English girls in her own home and amongst friends and relations, Eliza saw herself as improving the lot of the deserving poor. According to information provided by family members, these domestic exchanges did occur, although there is no further documentation to confirm it.

Two sketchily executed charcoal studies, one of a political riot, and the other of a street incident, remain as reminders of Edith Collier's wider interest in the political events and dramas of her day. These works, like many Edith Collier produced at this time, are likely to have been done in response to exercises set by St. John's Wood teaching staff. What is interesting about these drawings is the intensity of mood she manages to inject into what amounts to student exercises. One work entitled *Labour Trouble: The Student Raid at Albert Hall During Larkin's Speech* (see cat. no. 88) shows a frenzied crowd, only just kept in check by threatening silhouetted figures of policemen who attempt to surround the mob; while another scene, described as *A London Street Incident* (see cat. no. 89), illustrates a group of people crowding round in confusion, powerless it would seem, and dwarfed by the huge buildings that surround them. Both scenes are set at night and convey a sense of tension and anxiety. While obviously aware of labour difficulties and social strife, another theme that is apparent in Edith Collier's letters home is her sadness about the conflict in Ireland and her wish for Home Rule<sup>56</sup> and autonomy for the Irish people. Although not a radical in terms of her political beliefs, Edith Collier was certainly open-minded and considered in her judgements and opinions. Edith Collier's involvement with the suffragette movement, her awareness of labour demands, political strife and social disturbance, are all testimony to the fact that her perspectives and understanding of British society went far beyond that of a casual sight-seer.

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<sup>55</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, undated, 1914-1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Mrs Proctor was to become Edith Collier's landlady at 5 Leinster Square.

<sup>56</sup> The term Home Rule was developed in 1873 to designate the demand for self-government in Ireland. The issue of Ireland being politically independent of British control was one which generated much heated debate and political strife, especially in the opening decades of the twentieth century. The Home Rule Bill introduced by Mr Asquith in 1912 met with fierce opposition in Ulster, which was mainly Protestant. In 1914 the Bill was passed in the House of Commons and was bound to become law, making the prospect of Civil War in Ireland even more imminent. World War One brought a dramatic turn of events for the Home Rule movement. The Bill was passed with a proviso that it was not to come into force until after the war. On Easter Monday, 1916, tension boiled over and rebellion broke out in Dublin. It was organised by the Sinn Feinn (Ourselves Alone) Party and assisted by Germany. A terrible campaign of violence and reprisal followed and the country was plunged into virtual civil war. In 1920 the Home Rule Act of 1914 was repealed and a new act was passed giving Ireland two parliaments, one for the South and West, and another for the six northern counties of Ulster. Hostility to Home Rule in Ulster continued to intensify.

While scenes of riot and social tension may not have been of much interest to her family at home in New Zealand, Edith Collier's paintings of the interiors of well-known London churches certainly were. Eliza wrote:

We have our dining room finished now and your pictures of St. Bartholomew's Church hanging... also the snow scene from your bedroom window.... I suppose you go to Church as usual don't get careless of "The day of rest". There is nothing to be gained by it....<sup>57</sup>

Acquiring a three month pass which allowed her, for a fee of 2/6, to sketch in the Nave, Transepts and Precincts, Edith Collier worked at Westminster Abbey in 1914, "and began, also, the first of a number of oil paintings of the interior of the ancient South London church, St. Bartholomew's, Smithfield."<sup>58</sup> Two interior scenes from St. Bartholomew's (see cat. nos. 92 and 93) depict the magnificently heavy nature of the columns and arches and show how adept Edith Collier was at conveying the power of religious architecture in paint. Her paintings of Westminster Abbey and St. Bartholomew's Church are some of her finest works of this period. However, while illustrating her skills and abilities as a painter, they also show the limitations of her aesthetic knowledge and vision. By the end of 1914, Edith Collier had been in London two years yet her subject matter and painterly approach remained untouched by modernist innovations. Like many other artists in Britain, she was still working in the mode of a late Victorian academic painter.

While the St. Bartholomew's Church series of paintings was given pride of place on her parents' dining room wall, other aspects of their daughter's stay began to disturb them. The financially demanding venture of Edith Collier's fees, accommodation costs and travelling expenses were by 1914 already a drain on the family resources. Eliza was eager to see her daughter complete her studies and return home, writing:

Your last news was just after you returned to London, after the good time your relations gave you in Manchester, I will be very pleased now to hear where you have made a start with your studies, because the sooner you begin the sooner ended. I sometimes wish you were back again already.<sup>59</sup>

Although Edith Collier's attitude to her studies at St. John's Wood was ambivalent, she recognised the benefit of training and exposure to ideas, and of the value of like-minded female company. Ardent in her desire to keep up her contacts, and to extend her training period as long as possible, Edith Collier's sympathy would have gone out to her friend Zahra, when she arrived back from her Christmas vacation in January 1914 and read:

I wish I was coming back this term as I miss my work and the dear old 'Wood' and all of you dreadfully. My people think it is time I did something, so I am looking out for some children to teach but have not heard of any as yet.... It was very kind of you to wish to buy my sketch of the "Gateway and Ducklings"!

<sup>57</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 11 June [1914 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>58</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, pp. 8-10.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 9 July 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

(which by the way were supposed to be chickens!) and which I sold at the Christmas show. I am sorry Collier, as I would have liked you to have had it. However I may do something later on that may please you.<sup>60</sup>

With lives dictated by family monies and parental authority, many women's careers were shaped, determined, and even truncated by factors beyond their control. Treated still as less than adults, moves were made and future courses set without their consideration or consent. For many female students, there remained always a sense of powerlessness; a knowledge that one's own ambitions might be deflected or diverted at any time by the conveniences of the family.

Fearful of the wayward influence of London life, and disturbed by the fact that Edith Collier's overseas experiences might somehow make her unsuitable, or unfit, to endure the routines and realities of Wanganui, Eliza continued to moderate her daughter's behaviour, constantly reminding her of her responsibility to conduct herself in a manner appropriate to her class and sex. Responding often defensively, Edith Collier seldom allowed herself to adopt an adult, let alone, superior position. Her own opinions were tentatively stated and hesitantly given, and news of her life was often qualified and excused. For example:

Well I seem to be talking about myself, but you said tell me about your work and don't think I have got a swollen head come to London if one is inclined to have one you might to [sic] get cured.<sup>61</sup>

Relieved and grateful that the long arm of family supervision might continue to work in a more concrete sense through the chaperonage of their Manchester relatives, Eliza and Henry were pleased to see their daughter spend as much of her free time with relations as possible. Edith Collier's stays in Manchester were, however, far from the controlled and restrictive experiences her parents may well have imagined. She wrote to them after one such visit:

I really have been awful in writing, but really at Uncle Fred's [see cat. no. 355] especially this year you seemed to be going the whole time, hardly even in bed before one o'clock and then we got up so late and rushed round there was always someone there.... My I did have a time at Uncle Fred's with music. Uncle F. is a real good sort, he gave me several lessons.<sup>62</sup>

While Edith Collier greatly enjoyed her time with her relations and was very fond of her uncle, it was her relationship with cousin Fannie that became especially significant to her during her stay in Britain. Sharing experiences and ideas together, the two women formed a close attachment. It appears that Edith Collier confided in Fannie her intention of travelling

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<sup>60</sup> Letter from Zahra [?] to Edith Collier, 21 January 1914. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>61</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>62</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 January [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

to Brittany and invited her cousin to accompany her. Fannie wrote to Edith Collier's brother Harry, on 31 July 1914:

Edith told me she had sent out some pictures, have you been home lately to investigate? She went to Brittany yesterday, she ought to have a fine time. She suggested I went and did a little economic research amongst the peasants - how they use cabbage water etc.! it was a good idea but has not materialised.<sup>63</sup>

In spite of Fannie's comment at this time, there is no extant documentary evidence to confirm a trip to Brittany. In fact, a letter written by Edith Collier to her parents in 1915, stated:

Mr Gibson was lucky in getting to France. I'll never see it I suppose or Holland, but there is plenty to see in London, this is a long letter I am afraid you will be tired.<sup>64</sup>

Though there is no evidence in Edith Collier's paintings and drawings that she travelled to Brittany, even for a short period, it is clear at this early stage in her time abroad, that she was already interested in working with and portraying peasant cultures, and had discussed this interest with her cousin Fannie. Edith Collier knew that Brittany promised the artistic traveller distinctive art and architecture, and a people about whom "there was something very exotic."<sup>65</sup> She also knew "there were other things which interested foreign observers, such as their strong folklore tradition and intense Catholicism. The latter was especially manifest in their numerous quaint religious festivals held throughout the year."<sup>66</sup> She was motivated enough to make arrangements to travel to Brittany, and then when these appear to have failed, she made further attempts to pursue this subject matter by planning stays amongst artistic communities in Cornwall and Ireland. Cornwall and Ireland offered similar peasant populations to study and use as the subject of her work. Like Brittany, not only did Cornwall and Ireland offer exposure to cultures which were dramatically different from life in metropolitan London, but they also offered geographic beauty, architectural quaintness, artistic instruction, and isolation from the distractions of the city.

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<sup>63</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Harry Collier, 31 July 1914. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery. Wanganui.

<sup>65</sup> M. Jacobs, *The Good and Simple Life: Artists Colonies in Europe and America*. Oxford, 1985, p. 43.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.* p. 44.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Art and War: 1914-1915

The pressure for Edith Collier to return to New Zealand increased as the days and months of her absence rolled by. Minna Russell missed her friend, and wrote from Wanganui:

I hardly know anything about you now, as I do not often see anything of your family. I was up one day lately, but Thea was the only one home.... I wonder if you will get this letter, I wonder how things will be in about five weeks time when you will receive this I suppose... I hardly know what to say after this long silence, and by the time you come home I will be too shy to speak to you. I'm very glad you have made some nice friends and are getting on well. I heard this from your mother.<sup>1</sup>

While Minna's sister, Olive Russell, added:

Dear Edith,

I have asked Minna if I can put something at the top of her page and she says "if it is not too silly". So I will have to be very careful and just send my love along in this envelope. So I hope you receive it all again. I went to see Mrs Parkes snr on Tuesday and she looked well and bright and talking about you. As usual when are you coming home? We will all be old and grey if you are not quick, those of us who are not married.

Love from your friend in law. Olive.<sup>2</sup>

Torn between her ambition and her need for comfortable and familiar relationships, Edith Collier's own attitude to coming home became increasingly contradictory and hard to read, even for her oldest friends. Rather sadly, Minna Russell wrote:

Dolly gave me a frame for your photo last time she was over. She comes to the top of the hill with me when I am going home from your place and comes over to see me when I have been away like you used to. They often talk of you coming home....

I expect you wish in a way you could come home too.... Yes, as you say we are getting on, I hope its in the right direction for us both....

P. S. Now I have written it seems as long as a paper. Olive has just said "It will be nice to have her home again won't it?"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Minna Russell to Edith Collier, 6 September [1914 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>2</sup> Note from Olive Russell to Edith Collier, written in the margin of a letter from Minna Russell to Edith Collier, 27 July [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Minna Russell to Edith Collier, 27 July [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.



Edith Collier faced the additional pressure of on-going money worries. Although, in the beginning her financial resources seemed adequate, as her stay was extended, first by choice and then by the war, her allowance ceased to cover her expenses. Concern about money matters then became a pressing issue, and a recurring theme throughout her correspondence with her parents and other close family members. Remembering her aunt's difficulties, Patricia Lonsdale writes:

She was always short of money. Her father, who paid for her studies in Britain, was often late in sending her allowance. It was war-time, mails were infrequent and often lost to enemy torpedoes at sea. Had it not been for her brother, Harry, who was in the Royal Flying Corp and stationed in Britain and France, life would have been very difficult....<sup>4</sup>

In need of financial assistance, yet always reluctant to request it, Edith Collier was also assisted by her Uncle Herbert. She wrote to her parents on one such occasion, and said:

I didn't know Uncle H[erbert] - had cabled for all that money for me, but I was very short and owed money. Thank you very much I won't waste a cent; they will tell you what I am doing, but if I try and exhibit, I must have decent frames; even if the paintings are not.<sup>5</sup>

Trying to live conservatively to place as little demand on her financial resources as possible, Edith Collier found that even these measures were not enough to solve the problem of the deficit between her income and expenditure. Edith Collier frustratedly wrote of her New Zealand uncle, aunt and cousins who toured Britain, "I haven't spent as much money as they I am careful, but it takes such a lot to live eat and dress [sic] getting your washing done. I do what I can",<sup>6</sup> and the following year, still worried about the problem:

I would get work to do 24/- a week and jolly long hours for canteen work you are not paid at all, but they give you food. There are millions of women grabbing after every decent job, but I really ought to earn something.... I am really careful with the gold but when the boys are here I seem to spend more having meals here and so forth.<sup>7</sup>

While the idea of working at an unskilled job was unattractive, the prospect of making money as an artist was equally problematic. Edith Collier was forced to compromise her standards and ideas about art for what was no doubt, a modest sum of money:

I am just going to try my hand at painting portraits from photos it is not art, but it will bring in money. I am doing father's.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Lonsdale, "Edith Collier in Retrospect", p. 3. Patricia Lonsdale also adds in her letter, dated 1 April 1993, "Frank... also helped Edith financially but he arrived after the Armistice. He did not see active service."

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 1 April [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Edith Collier's Uncle Herbert travelled from New Zealand to Britain with his family, in 1914.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 1 March [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 15 August [1916-1917 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. The "boys" that are referred to in this letter are Edith's brothers and male cousins, who were at that stage fighting in World War One.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, undated, 1915-1916 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Although there is no surviving record of how many portraits she painted, or to whom she may have sold them, it appears from her correspondence that Edith Collier did, in fact, sell work while she was abroad. She possibly worked on commission.

In spite of her pressing financial circumstances, on the good advice of her parents, Edith Collier maintained her music and cello lessons while in Britain. Eliza saw Edith Collier's trip abroad as more than just an opportunity to study art, and wrote:

....as Mrs Aiken sensibly says you have gone over there to improve yourself, why not make the best use of your time for art as well as culture. Father will write and explain all.<sup>9</sup>

Henry communicated the voice of patriarchal authority:

I have not heard whether you are taking any lessons on the cello if not I think you had better go to that teacher Uncle Herbert has been taking lessons from. Painting should not take the whole of your time - You should attend those Sunday afternoon Concerts that are held in the Queen's Hall - You could attend those alone if you have no one to go with - They will be an education for you.<sup>10</sup>

After having her parents' wishes expressed in such an unambiguous manner, Edith Collier had little choice but to find a suitable teacher and resume her cello lessons as soon as possible. She was greatly encouraged by her new music teacher, Miss Bridson -

....she said to me I can't understand why you should have given up your music when you are so clever I nearly fell off the chair and said do you really think so - of course I do she said haven't I given you 2 hours instead of one because I am interested in you. Of course now I am sorry that I haven't done the cello here all along but I really thought I was no good at it<sup>11</sup>

- and clearly became fond of her: "I like Miss Bridson when I take lessons," Edith Collier wrote. "I think I amuse Miss Bridson it is the end of term for her and I am the only pupil she has just now I said would she rather not teach during holiday Miss B-- said I would like to keep you as you are interesting.... I guess she thinks I am quaint."<sup>12</sup> Eliza's response to the news of her daughter's recommencement of her musical endeavours, and comment that "it would have been a pity if you had come home with this talent neglected",<sup>13</sup> shows Edith Collier's parents continuing efforts to shape their daughter into the complete 'accomplished woman'. The result of their well-intentioned efforts to continually broaden her focus and involve her in the wider aspects of culture, was in effect to deny Edith Collier the single-

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 16 July 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Henry Collier to Edith Collier, undated, 1913 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1914-1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>12</sup> These quotations come from three different letters which are listed below as they appear in the text. Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 1 March [1915 ?] Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 20 March [1915 ?] Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 12 April [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 11 June 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

mind, clear-focused ambition that seems to be the hallmark of the committed, creative spirit. By requiring their daughter to be culturally sophisticated, well-read, and to be able and artistically versatile, Eliza and Henry were in fact realising their own ambition: that of conspicuously spending money to create an accomplished, but essentially conventional young woman.

Anxious to gain her parents' approval, yet eager also to pursue her own dreams and ambitions, Edith Collier struggled to see herself as more than just clever and accomplished. She tentatively took on the role and persona of an artist who was serious about her studies and hopeful, it seems, of ultimately assuming a more professional position in the art world. She acknowledged, however, that there was conflict between her parents' aspirations and expectations of her conduct, and her own inclinations to life and art, and wrote:

You say you get [no] letters from me well it is a month since I got one. I am sure I have written after and I hope you won't regret sending me to England as you seem to think you will. I don't think my work is making me hard hearted I am not a gusher so what is the use trying to be something that I am not - gushers are always shams. A peculiarity I am and always will be, but I don't worry people much.<sup>14</sup>

Insecure and uncertain at times about who she is, and about the validity of what she is doing, Edith's "hard heartedness" may well be read as her parents' reaction to her growing commitment to a career in art. Edith Collier was unsupported by her parents in her pursuit of the more modern, and as they regarded it in a woman, more selfish persona of the artist. She had their affirmation only as long as she continued to assume traditionally female roles and qualities, even when those roles and qualities conflicted with her self-perception as an artist, and her vocational progress towards professionalism. Because she was denied a complete belief in herself as an artist, independent and unaccountable, she lacked the self-confidence and self-assertion which would otherwise have allowed her to place her will and desires above those of others. Edith Collier was controlled by her parents' manipulation of their approval, and was regularly made to consider whether she would meet their standards and expectations on her return. She responded to their criticism of her apparently changed nature, and said:

You give me a bad time in not writing... you seem to have made up your mind that I am different and am not going to settle down and goodness knows what. Don't forget I am an old bird rather late you know. Well I am quite sure I'll settle down alright [sic] don't you worry.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 1 March [1915?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. This statement by Edith Collier is remarkably close to a comment made by Frances Hodgkins in a letter to her brother William in July 1939. She wrote: "I think an artist's life is a very hard working and busy one... and also a lonely one - you haven't time for friends... I find the social side of living a great problem - Art is definitely anti-social - you can only work in solitude - that is, work creatively...." Quoted in E. H. McCormick, *The Expatriate: A Study of Frances Hodgkins*. Wellington, 1954, p. 231.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 January [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Women's self-doubt is more potentially destructive to women's lives than "institutional discrimination or exclusion from academic education",<sup>16</sup> and the failure of society to instil in women a belief in themselves has curtailed and controlled the fulfilment of many female careers. Fearing failure and pitching their expectations below their potential, it is women's lack of self-confidence that has acted as the greatest enemy of women's drive and their sense of the freedom and space to experiment.

While St. John's Wood art classes and cello lessons continued unabated, the arrival of Edith Collier's relations from New Zealand in the mid-months of 1914 brought a new round of sight-seeing and social interaction for the artist. Edith Collier much anticipated and greatly enjoyed the visit of her Uncle Herbert, Aunt Ada, and Cousins, Herbert, Irene and Ida, who brought fresh news of her family at home. Edith Collier took time away from her work to entertain her relations, and show them round the city:

Yesterday morning we went shopping [sic] bought a hat for Rene after look[ing] through various shops - had lunch in the Strand Palace Hotel and then went to see Madame Tusous [sic] wax works first time I had seen it, once is enough you go into a big room an orchestra playing and wax figures all round we went into the chamber of horrors and saw famous murderers and how different people were tortured and people in prison. In the evening we went to Madame Butterfly all sung in Italian if you want to get a good seat you have to wait for hours by the time you get in I think you have earnt it. I think they intend having a good time they are coming back to London in the winter I believe.<sup>17</sup>

Given the political tensions and deteriorating relationships between countries on the continent, Herbert and Ada Collier chose a particularly difficult and inconvenient time to make a family trip 'Home'. Only a matter of weeks after their arrival in Britain, war was declared in Europe. Fannie responded to the news of war perceptively and with almost prophetic insight, writing to Edith Collier's brother Harry in New Zealand on 31 July 1914:

Isn't this war horrible? I can hardly believe that at the present day Europe is contemplating wholesale slaughter. There seems very little chance of averting it, it is too ghastly for words. Can you imagine how men can be persuaded to do it? It's not as if there is any terrific national cause. Austria behaved disgustingly about Serbia's port, and Serbia retorted by refusing to hand over the officers implicated in the Archdukes murder. But what is the use of murdering each other? both affairs are the doing of a few and yet two nations are to pour blood and money away, and may be drag in other countries - whose reason for fighting is still more remote! I give it up! it seems on the face of it as if common sense is extremely lacking - it's no wonder men don't want women in politics if this is the amount of reasoning power they use. Have you noticed how God is dragged into it? all the big people, the Tsar, the Emperor of Austria and the principle Generals etc. have piously rolled their eyes to the heavens and said "God's will be done" - why the sky doesn't drop on them is marvellous, to use the Almighty as an excuse for slaughter and ruin puts us a jolly sight lower than the savage who fights because he wants something and means to have it! War is loathsome, it takes a people centuries to recover from the abandon of every restraint decent society has evolved, their standards are lowered, their feelings coarsened.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> R. Parker and G. Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. London, 1981, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 25 September 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Harry Collier, 31 September 1914. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

Following Fannie's predictions with startling accuracy, within days of its beginning the conflict in Europe was already escalating to the extent where many nations other than the initial protagonists were obliged to become involved. While the first two years of Edith Collier's stay in Britain were largely free of the concrete responsibilities which she had previously shouldered, the First World War, with its deployment of New Zealand soldiers, brought for the artist yet another round of nurturing good will and acts of service. Eliza kept her daughter informed of family friends and relations in Wanganui who had enlisted and were leaving New Zealand, or in some cases were already casualties of war:

Mr and Mrs Russell have gone to Wellington to see Jack off to the Front, it will be a hard parting - so many young men from Wang[anui] have fallen at the Dardenells every mornings paper bring fresh sad news. I was telling Jack R[ussell] if he has the chance of getting to Fannie to write to you (as many of the Wang[anui] boys are in hospital there) and I do hope you will make an effort to see him and help or take him nice things - I am very fond of Jack he is a nice boy.<sup>19</sup>

Being reminded by her mother of her female duty to nurture and care for men, Edith Collier put aside much of her precious time and money to feed, entertain and assist them, both in their active service and on leave. "Well mother I'll do everything I possibly [illegible] can for your boys,"<sup>20</sup> was the promise she gave Eliza, and certainly kept. In spite of her personal reservations about the war, Edith Collier worked very hard to support her brothers and extended family in their time abroad by sending letters, food parcels, storing gear and providing a place to stay. In addition to her responsibilities of caring for specific family members on leave and at the Front, Edith Collier was required to visit injured soldiers who were acquaintances of her family in New Zealand; the artist's sister Vera wrote of an injured friend:

Will you... find out what hospital he is at and trot along to see him. Jim his brother as I expect you already know was killed about the same time as Alf was wounded. Ernie is also in the firing line and George has returned wounded so they have done their share towards putting down the Germans.<sup>21</sup>

A number of letters expressing gratitude for Edith Collier's assistance have survived this period as a testimony to the magnanimous nature of her effort, one written by her Aunt Annie stated:

What a fine time you and Hal had in London, what would the boys do without you. The next one for you to be taking under your wing will be Harry I suppose. What a busy mother you will be with all your sons

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<sup>19</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 11 June 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 16 April [1916 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Vera Collier to Edith Collier, 18 September 1916. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

around you. I'm afraid Edith it is costing you a good deal sending all those parcels over to give them a good feed.<sup>22</sup>

Edith Collier continued to paint in spite of the tasks associated with having family members at the front and accommodating her brothers and their friends on leave, and often resorted to completing her work at night. Illuminating her attic room with a small gas pilot light, "[o]ne evening she heard a noise outside and opened her window to find four policemen sitting on the parapet of the mansard roof, watching her shadow shifting on the blind."<sup>23</sup> Having been informed that Edith Collier might be a spy signalling codes to the Germans, a group of local police had stationed themselves to observe her behaviour and make a possible arrest. Suspicious of foreigners, and possibly seeing her alibi as a rather thin cover, the police questioned their suspect and considered the situation for some time before being convinced of her innocence. Finally accepting Edith Collier's word, the slightly embarrassed policemen were obliged to remove themselves from her attic studio empty-handed. A friend, Adeline, heard the news back in New Zealand of some of the artist's scrapes and commented, "I hear you have had some experience taken for German spy and suffragette. I expect they are often making mistakes...."<sup>24</sup>

Although Edith Collier willingly contributed as much of her time and resources as she realistically could to assist her family and friends, her feelings about the necessity for armed struggle were mixed. She wrote to her parents:

They are always saying who they think should go to war. I don't see that I showed the wrong spirit in wishing the war would soon be over.... Please excuse the blots [on] paper they are really my tears.... Please burn when read.<sup>25</sup>

Concerned and sympathetic about the pressure put on men to enlist, Edith Collier out-lined to her parents the position of a male cousin in Manchester:

Philip belongs to a Home Defence Cor. but he said last night that he believed it was going to be broken up as the war office wouldn't recognise it, they want all the men to go to war. In Manchester they make it red hot for the men who stay home everywhere you turn there is a card or poster saying what right have you to be at home etc. Manchester has more recruits than any other town.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Aunt Annie to Edith Collier, 4 January 1917. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>23</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Adeline [?] to Edith Collier, 22 June [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 1 September 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 January [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Edith Collier appears to have been disenchanted with war from its earliest beginnings and viewed the conflict as her cousin Fannie did. News of the arrival back in New Zealand of the first contingent of injured soldiers made Edith Collier increasingly disillusioned and doubtful about the results of armed conflict. Bella Livingston, a friend in Wanganui, described the event:

Isn't this War dreadful, it is nearly a year since it began and yet it does not seem to be anywhere near ending, does it? The first lot of New Zealand wounded returned home to Wellington by the Hospital Ship Willochra, last week, and they were very warmly welcomed as you can imagine. They had a specially fitted Red Cross train to take them to their home's, and by all accounts in the papers they did not want for anything.<sup>27</sup>

Edith Collier was angered by the potential loss to the Dominion of labour and lives, and felt frustrated at the powerlessness of the individual in the face of government policy and pressure:

I think the N. Z. govt. is dotty, why skin the country so of men - sent more than any country in proportion to population and a farming country at that.<sup>28</sup>

Edith Collier was aware that her own country was being depleted of man-power, and was correspondingly conscious of the results of troop deployment in Britain. "All the villages," she wrote, "are full of soldiers in England."<sup>29</sup> She was also concerned about the consequences of war for women. Edith's c. 1917-1918 painting *Ministry of Labour - Recruiting Office for Women* (see cat. no. 313) shows a group of women waiting to offer their labour for tasks and employment associated with the war effort. This subject matter is unique, not only in Edith Collier's oeuvre, but also in the work of contemporary painters of this period. This painting does not aggrandise women's contribution, but rather portrays it as being positive, energetic, autonomous, and capable. Pressure from her parents to make a contribution to the war effort became an emotionally charged subject for Edith Collier herself:

I'll try and answer your questions there are thousands and thousands of women over here who want to help and there is no room for them I don't know if I could do anything (not knit) well anyhow the models that I had were poor. I did all I could for them which isn't much....<sup>30</sup>

... I see you think I am at the N. Z. canteen. I thought I told you months ago how it was I didn't go. I went down and was to have gone along with a Mrs Higgins or something when I got there she seemed as if she didn't want me after saying why don't you go, told me they had plenty of help, I drew back as there is always plenty to help at a soldiers canteen, but they wanted help very badly for women war workers at night so I go there.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from: Bella Livingston to Edith Collier, undated, 1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 30 June [1915-1916 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, undated, 1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 1 April [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

These are mostly widows who have been hit by the war and have to work as the pension won't educate the children different lots work day and night. I help with the all night lot. The Govt. provide food and the Y. W. C. A. give it to them. Some of the women are about 50 or more. Thousands of women whose husbands were lawyers and so forth who have got [no one] to turn to a munition [sic] shop were [sic] I go is an immense Engineering College, but is now into war material near the Albert Hall so I am a Y. W. C. A. worker. Art Work I am doing posters finished lettering....<sup>31</sup>

Sympathetic, once again, to the particular plight of the female population, Edith Collier was quick to shift her focus to the less obviously heroic deprivations of women. Though women suffered in a state of comparative silence, Edith Collier was perceptive enough to see their needs as worthwhile and as necessary to attend to as the needs of men.

Although the hardships and deprivations of the war were not immediately felt by all, in time they began to affect the life of every soldier and civilian in Europe. M. Cullinan, a female friend living in Bonmahon, Ireland, stated in a letter to Edith Collier:

....I always think of you when I hear of the air rades [sic] have they droped [sic] any bombs [sic] near where you are living the air raides [sic] are bad enough but the submarines are worse, because they are the cause of the cascicy [sic] of food the prices here have gone up so the bachon [sic] is now 2/1 per 1lb Tea 4/6 lb Suggar [sic], butter 2/. Suggar [sic] is very carse [sic] but I manage to get all I want Eggs are 3/6 per dozen. I suppose every thing must be much dearer in London.<sup>32</sup>

At this stage, Edith Collier faced both food shortages and the very real danger of dying in an air raid, as well as the temptation to give into family pressure and return to New Zealand. Eliza was worried about her daughter's safety and well-being, and wrote:

The time is spinning round for you to come back. I suppose you will be quite sorry to leave when the time comes, I can imagine you rushing round London, leaving everything till the last. I must send you some money especially for a few presents for friends, I know you would like to bring something back, especially for Grandma, a black silk shawl or something useful. She is very well again.<sup>33</sup>

But after she had considered the prospect of her return, Edith Collier responded:

About coming out to N. Z. you wrote in your last letter, if I could it would be jolly hard just as H[arry] - goes over. They are not allowing women and children to travel on seas at present... but the war is going to last so much longer.... [and, as if to appease them for staying longer] Of course I was thinking of being a first class teacher when I get to N. Z.<sup>34</sup>

Quietly determined to remain beyond the eager bosom of her family, Edith Collier could now see her presence in England as fulfilling an essential role within the family; apart from those commitments, she was still free to pursue her passion for art.

31 Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier [?] undated, 1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

32 Letter from M. Cullinan to Edith Collier, 18 November [1916 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

33 Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 20 July 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

34 Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier [?] undated, 1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.



Instead of leaving Britain, Edith Collier involved herself with what she saw as the pressing issue of finding more suitable accommodation. She stated that, "C. Ayliff has left Q. A. H. and another friend has left."<sup>35</sup> Moving in 1914 or 1915 to 5 Leinster Square, Edith Collier was now able to provide her brothers, cousins and their friends with a place to stay in London. After leaving the student hostel, "for a boarding house kept by a motherly widow, Mrs Proctor",<sup>36</sup> Edith Collier responded to the kindness of her new landlady by producing a pencil portrait study, and a number of painted studies and finished canvas with Mrs Proctor as their subject. These works show the beginnings of an interest in modernist innovations. Although the painted sketches are only rapidly executed studies (see cat. nos. 179-181), they illustrate a flatness and a new awareness of a decorative rather than purely representational aesthetic. There is something experimental about these works which is largely missing in the final canvas (see cat. no. 178), and completely absent from the pencil portrait, *Study of a Landlady* (see cat. no. 175), which is a detailed realistic drawing of Mrs Proctor. Synonymous with her own personal freedom was a new branching out and sense of experimentation in her work, which was hesitatingly pursued at the beginning, and later gained momentum as she herself gained confidence.

Edith Collier's attic rooms not only offered her more freedom and independence than a hostel, but they also provided a suitable venue to entertain and accommodate her brothers, cousins and their friends. For the Collier males and their acquaintances, Edith Collier's rooms in London offered a necessary refuge from the dangers and stress of war. Edith Collier wrote of one such stay with her cousin:

Hal has just been up on 4 days leave I saw him off from Waterloo last night and he expects to be going to France tomorrow he is in the Infantry again worse luck. He was a bit homesick this time he kept talking of Mum. He left a lot of his things that he had collected and his diary here. If I am to come home before the war ends I'll keep my cupboard on for the boys. Reg has a lot of things here and some of his friends.<sup>37</sup>

Edith Collier's painting, *Serviceman in Attic Studio* (see cat. no. 311), illustrates a visit from one of her brothers or cousins on leave. The single figure of a serviceman sits at leisure on the artist's bed reading a book. In her attic rooms, Edith Collier was also freer to accommodate and entertain her New Zealand relations on their return from Manchester to London. She stated:

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<sup>35</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 12 April [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>36</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 27 February [1917 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Mr Hardy used to make me play the piano my few pieces he said he liked my playing had such a sympathetic touch / he knows nothing about music, but I always had to play my one piece.  
 Uncle H - and family and I went to see David Copperfield it was awfully good. I wish you could have seen it - well I haven't spent much on theatres.  
 Isn't a [sic] shame about the N. Z. boat going down with all the cargo. Don't you worry over the bombs and Germans.<sup>38</sup>

Although Edith Collier felt, perhaps rather naively, that she could reassure her parents of her safety in the face of air raids and bombs, she wrote of her uncle's preparations for the return voyage to New Zealand:

The German subs are getting a bit lively lately Uncle H[erbert] is buying some of those life collars you blow them up and tie them around your neck and they keep you up. They are quite small.<sup>39</sup>

Edith Collier was making plans for a trip to Bonmahon in Ireland while she contemplated the inevitable departure of her family. Bonmahon promised novelty and adventure in the face her imminent separation from people associated with Wanganui and home:

The cousins sail for N. Z. tonight they should have left last night the boat was delayed here.  
 All my friends are away from London now Ayliff is at Red Hill and some in Bonmahon Ireland. I am going to Ireland on Thursday sailing at night. C. Ayliff is coming over later on.<sup>40</sup>

Edith Collier took two trips across to Bonmahon in Southern Ireland to work and study with the Australian artist Margaret Macpherson. Required to register as an artist before she travelled abroad, Edith Collier left the food shortages and air raids of London for the savage beauty of Ireland.

Although Edith Collier made a trip to Bonmahon in 1914, it is her considerably longer trip undertaken in 1915 which resulted in some of her most striking work. Edith Collier's decision to leave London and join her friends working in Bonmahon inevitably made the impact of her separation from her uncle, aunt and cousins less severe. Captivated by the beauty of Ireland, and overwhelmed, it would seem, by the opportunities to work and paint, Edith Collier found Bonmahon "a grand place for painting. Models of all sorts seascapes, and landscape without

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<sup>38</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 2 February [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>39</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 1 April [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>40</sup> Letter from Edith to Eliza and Henry Collier, 12 April [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. A letter responding to the 'cousin's' safe arrival in New Zealand, states: "We were very thankful to know that you had arrived safely in Bonmahon again, it was a bit risky.... Well the cousins are home and looking well they seem to have enjoyed themselves, father and I went over on Sunday afternoon and stayed to tea they were all talking at once. Uncle Herbert was in one of his comical humours taking Aunt Ada and cousins off, because they exaggerate so, we laughed till the tears were streaming down our cheeks.... We heard all about you how well you were looking quite plump cheeks and a good colour and how smart you looked when you came in your new costume, and also how well you were progressing in Art, you must have felt a bit homesick when they left you to come back to God's own." Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 11 June 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

going far."<sup>41</sup> Edith Collier expressed the feeling of being unable at times to do justice to the majestic qualities of the Irish landscape, and her sister Dorothy remonstrated in reply:

You once mentioned a beautiful view in Ireland you saw when walking along the lanes with hedges on either side and wild flowers and in the distance the mountains. I always wish you had painted that but you said it was unpaintable I don't see why.... I have a great mania for pictures.<sup>42</sup>

Judging from works like the *Rocks of Bonmahon, Ireland* (see cat. no. 217) and *A Grey Day on the Irish Coast* (see cat. no. 218), it was not often that Edith Collier found the representation of Irish scenes difficult or elusive.

Although Edith Collier appears to have had a brief visit to St. Ives<sup>43</sup> in 1915, her major connections at this time seem to have been with Margaret Macpherson and her group of women artists at Bonmahon. As Janet Paul points out, "there is no reference to Edith Collier during the years 1913-1921 which suggests no friendship close enough for an exchange of letters but she could have been one of the 'six pupils' Frances Hodgkins mentions in 1915."<sup>44</sup> As the records and information available stand, it is possible only to speculate as to the contact Edith Collier and Frances Hodgkins might have had before 1920. It is sure, however, that if there was an earlier meeting, it was a connection that neither of them saw as important enough to record.

The power of the Irish countryside and culture and the charisma of Margaret Macpherson held a strong fascination for Edith Collier and inspired her soon to return. She wrote of Bonmahon:

...it is so hard to get a descent [sic] teacher and really living in England is expensive and I am learning a lot here, it seems selfish to be painting and all that with this war and thousands dying, but it may be of some use later on when I get back to London.<sup>45</sup>

Ever conscious of the horrors and disruptions of war, Ireland offered Edith Collier a brief, if only partial escape. In Ireland she could assert her primary role as that of artist, take

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<sup>41</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Henry Collier, 5 July [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Dorothy Collier to Edith Collier, 10 April 1916. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>43</sup> Janet Paul identifies a postcard received by Edith dated 1915, and addressed to the Wharf Studios, White Hart House, St. Ives, Cornwall.

<sup>44</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 12. Writing on the same subject, Linda Gill states: "You will have read Janet Paul's essay in the Sarjeant Gallery catalogue in which she speculates that the two women might have met in 1915 when Edith was in St. Ives. I have not found any reference to this in Hodgkins' letters of that period. Collier is introduced in the 1920 letter without any reference to a past meeting or any intervening meetings, and Hodgkins sometimes provided information of this kind about other friends. There are no references to Collier after 1921." Letter from Linda Gill to author, 13 July 1993.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

confidence in that, and forget for a while family manipulations, responsibilities, and the on-going pressure to return home. In Bonmahon she could live cheaply, reduce money pressures for a while, and become absorbed in her work. "My Irish friends sent me a lot of Shamrock last week," she wrote after her return to London, "never enjoyed myself anywhere like Ireland. I wish they could get some settlement about Home Rule."<sup>46</sup> Edith Collier enjoyed the people, and the culture and countryside of Ireland. Bonmahon was a place where she could live, work, and be perceived by the community and her colleagues as an artist, and it was in this situation that she was happiest.

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<sup>46</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 25 March [1915-1916 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Macpherson and Collier: 1915-1917

Edith Collier was perceptive and astute in her choice of Margaret Macpherson as a teacher. She recognised the Australian's talent as a teacher and dynamism as a person, and knew she could do no better. Her marginal status as a woman painter did not allow Edith Collier a wide range of possible teachers. Margaret Macpherson introduced Edith Collier to and her circle of artists and writers. Of one social occasion, Edith wrote:

[went with] Macpherson and others to Mr Gilbert's studio he is a very well known sculptor, it was very interesting seeing all his work, I met Mrs Grant Resman and her daughter Mrs G. R. has just written a book of poems she earns a living by writing, she asked me to her place to tea next Sat. I am in a bit of a fever, but of course I'll go as I'll meet a lot of interesting people there. We went back to Miss Macpherson to supper she has a lovely studio and we all sat round a big round table. Someone came late and Miss Macpherson started introducing like this Mrs G. R. -poetess another book of her poems coming out next week. Miss G. B. - novelist my turn next, Miss Collier paints exhibited in several exhibitions in London and got a brother at the front. Next came another painter and then Mr Gilbert. The last visitor was Mrs Dodson [sic]. Her husband is a well known painter, used to be at the Slade School.<sup>1</sup>

Without being British born, and part of the art establishment, she had little chance of making contacts and breaking into networks of innovative instruction and ideas. Edith Collier found her most significant teachers among other women artists working and studying in Britain. As she wrote to her parents:

Yes I am getting on with art or I wouldn't go on with it, but I have learnt more from Miss Mac than St. John's. St. John's is an old fashioned private school, very nice teachers, but it is really a bit out of date. I still belong to the sketch club.<sup>2</sup>

Edith Collier paid Margaret Macpherson five shillings<sup>3</sup> a lesson on top of her St. John's Wood Art School fees.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier [?] undated, 1915-1916 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Only the last two pages of this letter have survived. The sculptor called Mr [Web] Gilbert is an Australian artist. Mrs G. R., refers to Mrs Grant Rosman, Miss G. B. refers to Miss Grant Bruce, while Mrs Dodson actually refers to Mrs Dodgson - her husband being John Dodgson.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier [?], undated, 1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>3</sup> A hand written account postmarked 15 February 1915 for Margaret Macpherson's tuition fees held as part of the Edith Collier Papers at the Sarjeant Gallery in Wanganui, states that Edith Collier was required to pay for fourteen lessons from Margaret Macpherson, the first lesson was listed as being on the 14 December, and the last on 1 March.

I hope you and father won't be disappointed in my work after all the money he has spent it has been very hard to do anything in the art line of course, one thing I am thankful for is I met Miss Macpherson she gave the pull up at the beginning I know art students at St. John's still toddling along at school.<sup>4</sup>

Edith Collier had nothing but praise and admiration for her Australian colleague. Being ten years younger than Margaret Macpherson, and considerably less experienced in terms of overseas training, travel and exposure to art, Edith Collier regarded her as a touch-stone of modern ideas, set apart from an otherwise backward-looking array of tutors. Never appearing to find the strong-minded, straight-talking Australian too aggressive, Edith Collier worked with her off and on until Macpherson went back to Australia in 1919.

Although Edith Collier did not comment directly on Margaret Macpherson's personality or presence in the class room, Stella Bowen, then a young student, remembered the artist in 1911, before she left Australia for a second trip to Europe, as "a red-headed little fire-brand of a woman who was not only an excellent painter, fresh from Paris, but a most inspiring teacher. She had opened a studio in the city, and I should think was the only person in South Australia to employ a nude model."<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that Edith Collier's first introduction to modernism came from Margaret Macpherson. Prior to their meeting, Edith Collier's exposure to Post-Impressionist painting would have been very limited. She narrowly missed the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions, had not travelled through Europe or attended any of the major modernist exhibitions, and was only just orientating herself to the London art scene when the advent of war largely closed off the flow of ideas and images between Britain and the Continent. Edith Collier's main opportunity to gain exposure to new ideas and innovation till after World War One, came through the work and experiences of Margaret Macpherson.

Dynamic and inspiring as a tutor, Margaret Macpherson's childhood and early adult years in Australia did much to mould her on-going drive and determination. She was the elder daughter in an exclusively female family unit,<sup>6</sup> and her mother and sister had moved around Australia from one capital city to another to accommodate the budding young artist's career and talent. In an autobiographical essay, Margaret Macpherson recalled her decision to become an artist:

She remembers quite well her excitement on going through the turnstile to be let in at large in a big, quiet, nice-smelling place with a lot of pictures hanging on the walls and here and there students sitting on high

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, undated, 1915-1916 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>5</sup> Stella Bowen, *Drawn from Life*. London, 1984, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Roger Butler states: "Her father's profession required him to spend most of his time at sea and he rarely saw his family." *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 1. Early in 1894 Margaret Macpherson's father was admitted to an Adelaide asylum for 'imbecility' due to complications related to syphilis, and in July of the following year he died.

stools copying at easels. Her first impression was not of the beauty or wonder of the pictures, but how nice it must be to sit on a high stool with admiring people giving you "looks" as they went by.... This visit led her to decide to be an artist.<sup>7</sup>

Captured not by the lure of paint on canvas, Margaret Macpherson was enticed rather by the concept of celebrity; by the vision of herself, elevated, and admired by those around. The ambitious Margaret Macpherson trained at art institutions in Melbourne and Adelaide, "coming under the prevailing influence of the German School of painting."<sup>8</sup> Determined to make money and get ahead, when her studies in Australia had progressed as far as they could, she "made up her mind to teach for her living and paint her pictures as she would... leaving all thought of selling out of her mind."<sup>9</sup> She was successful in her efforts to teach and save, making her first trip to Europe in 1903. Released from her Australian commitments by the death of her mother, Margaret Macpherson and her companion of several years, Bessie Davidson,<sup>10</sup> travelled to Germany. Exposed to the work of German painters, Margaret Macpherson wrote later of her impressions:

My letters about this time written back to my native country could be compressed into a few sentences such as: Half German art is mad and vicious and a good deal of it is dull; I am glad to say my work stands with the best of them.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar manner to Frances Hodgkins, Margaret Macpherson had taken a trip abroad "to see really where she stood and also to get some 'finishing' lessons",<sup>12</sup> but, in contrast to Hodgkins, Macpherson believed at this stage that she stood strongly and had little to learn. Margaret Macpherson and Bessie Davidson moved to France in November 1904, hoping that Paris might offer more "finishing" than Munich with its extremes of modernity and mediocrity. Studying with Raphael Collin, Gustave Courtois and an American artist, Richard Miller, Margaret Macpherson was once again exposed to the work of modernists, this time

<sup>7</sup> M. Preston (nee Macpherson), "From Eggs to Electrolux". *Art in Australia*, 3rd series, No. 22, December 1927, n. p. This was written in the third person.

<sup>8</sup> R. Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> M. Preston, "From Eggs to Electrolux". *Art in Australia*, 3rd series, No. 22, December 1927, n. p.

<sup>10</sup> Writing on the nature of Margaret Macpherson's relationship with Bessie Davidson and another close woman companion, Gladys Reynell, Roger Butler, states: "Although it was rumoured that Macpherson had lesbian relationships with Bessie Davidson, and later with Gladys Reynell, this is by no means certain. It is just as likely that Macpherson acted as an older female teacher, companion and chaperone to these younger women." *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 25. Although this may seem a fair enough comment, it is naive to overlook the spirit of these relationships. Certainly, Margaret Macpherson thrived on her intense monogamous relationships with Bessie Davidson and Gladys Reynell and gained much in terms of motivation and emotional support for her career. As Elizabeth Butel points out in her book, *Margaret Preston: The Art of Constant Rearrangement* (Victoria, 1986, p.12.), "Her friendship with Bessie Davidson was something of a prototype for the two other important relationships in Preston's life - her friendship with the potter Gladys Reynell, and her marriage to William George Preston. Apart from sharing a professional relationship with Davidson, she apparently lived at the Davidsons' house in Prospect for two years, having been invited for a weekend sometime before 1910.... Preston does seem to have thrived on an intimate, supportive relationship, firstly with her two close women friends and later with her husband." It is possible to call Margaret Macpherson's relationships with these women lesbian, without there being any proof of a physical dimension. Interestingly, Bessie Davidson returned to Paris around 1910 and eventually made her home there, serving with the French in World War One, and then was part of the French Resistance during World War Two. When Margaret Macpherson and Gladys Reynell were in Paris in 1912, they stayed with Bessie Davidson in her apartment.

<sup>11</sup> E. Butel, *Margaret Preston: The Art of Constant Rearrangement*. Victoria, 1986, p.10.

<sup>12</sup> M. Preston, "From Eggs to Electrolux". *Art in Australia*, 3rd series, No. 22, December 1927, n. p.

those living or exhibiting in Paris. She was shocked and stimulated by the work of people as varied as Redon, Kandinsky, Matisse, Valminck, Rouault and Van Gogh (who had a retrospective in 1905), and returned to Australia and her teaching with new ideas and a new perspective on art. February 1912, however, found Margaret Macpherson heading for Europe once more. Accompanied this time by Gladys Reynell,<sup>13</sup> Margaret Macpherson settled in Paris with her new companion after a brief stay in London. In Paris she trained with Australian expatriate Rupert Bunny, and George Oberteuff, a North American who had lived in Paris since 1901. Margaret Macpherson was advised "to study Japanese art at the Guimet Muse' [sic]."<sup>14</sup> There amongst the Japanese prints and art work, she learnt that:

....there is more than one vision in art. That a picture could have more than eye realism. That there was such a thing as aesthetic feeling. That a picture that is meant to fill a space should decorate that space.... [and identifying this as a turning point, she adds] our poor little artist was obliged to become a very humble student indeed. She found that she had been hopping about on one rung only of the ladder of art. Starting off again she tries to add another quality to her realism - that of decoration.<sup>15</sup>

With these insights, and after being greatly impressed by the work of Paul Gauguin,<sup>16</sup> Margaret Macpherson moved with Gladys Reynell to London in October 1913, setting up a studio at 5 Trebovir Road in Earls Court. Eager to establish a reputation in London, "the artist's aims were quickly realised and in December she exhibited with the New English Art Club. In May 1914, she made her debut at the Royal Academy."<sup>17</sup> Margaret Macpherson and Gladys Reynell explored Southern Ireland in March 1914, finding the countryside so much to their liking that they went back a month later and stayed until October, during which time Edith Collier visited her. Margaret Macpherson returned to London in the autumn of 1914, and began teaching again, "attracting many of her pupils from St. John's Wood Art Schools."<sup>18</sup> Offering women students an exciting mixture of flamboyant self-confidence and professional credibility and competence, Margaret Macpherson greatly appealed to Edith Collier and her friends. Margaret Macpherson gave criticisms of people's work, recommended suitable locations and subject matter for her students to use in their studies and advised about exhibiting opportunities in London.

13 Gladys Reynell, a pupil of Margaret Macpherson's, took a leading part in the artist's life after Bessie Davidson's departure to France. "By April 1911 [Macpherson] had found a new studio... which she shared with her student and friend Gladys Reynell, the daughter of a South Australian pioneering family who established the Reynella Vineyards." *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 7.

14 M. Preston, "From Eggs to Electrolux". *Art in Australia*, 3rd series, No. 22, December 1927, n. p.

15 *ibid.*

16 "I've seen lately at the shows... the most beautiful thing there was by a man called Gauguin it was painted in Tahiti - a virgin Mary with a baby - it had the dense purple of the island hills at the back queer green banana tree foliage on purple earth the Tahitian woman dull ochre holding the Christ a blot of ochre - two figures in the shadow of a tree dull yellow and pink & in the foreground melons and tanyans in shadow - every colour every line helped to balance each other, it was only small but so sure." Margaret Macpherson to Norman Carter August 1913. Quoted in *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 9.

17 R. Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 8.

18 *ibid.*



Following her teacher's recommendations regarding establishing a reputation as an exhibiting artist, Edith Collier made a concerted effort, towards the end of 1914, to find suitable exhibiting venues in London beyond the St. John's Wood Sketch Club. Edith Collier took work along to be considered for entry in the R. A. A. S.<sup>19</sup> exhibition:

Yesterday I had a notice to take my daubs /4/ to Meyor W. Hussey at Hereford Gardens near Marble Arch of course. I had to get frames 2 portraits 1 landscape 1 still life this is to belong to the R. A. A. S. Society, but I won't know till May. Rene [Edith's New Zealand cousin] came along with me in a taxi I couldn't get anyone to take them as everyone was busy with the Academy. The butler came out and said Miss Collier and then carried the daubs in he said Meyor Hussey had to go out wasn't I glad.<sup>20</sup>

In spite of this ordeal, the results were reasonably pleasing and Edith Collier later informed her mother:

I have got into the R. A. A. S. Meyor Hussey wrote and said he would be pleased to give me a nomination.<sup>21</sup>

Edith Collier also sent work to the 1915 Royal Academy, though unsuccessfully:

I didn't get into the Academy, but I wasn't disappointed as I had to send five examples of work to be judged for the R. A. A. S. and didn't get them back till after the Academy opened so I only sent a charcoal drawing to the Academy. What got me into the R. A. A. S. was a portrait of an old man. Miss Mac - says I am especially keen on doing old people well I do like doing them best.<sup>22</sup>

The Royal Academy continued to remain elusive. However, having the vision to see the limitations of this goal, and having the insight to identify the mechanisms by which women and those outside the system were excluded, she wrote, after another refusal:

I tried to get 3 portraits into the Academy, but didn't, if I had sent some very early work up it might have got in, but in portraits it is hopeless, as all the old members have theirs in and they don't want portrait painters in of course. I wouldn't have missed getting one in, it is only humouring some old bug and doing a pretty little picture.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The Royal Anglo-Australian Society (R. A. A. S.) is described in *The Year's Art* (1914): "Founded in 1887 as the Royal Anglo-Australian Society of Artists for the purpose of holding exhibitions in the Australian Colonies. The society's scope has been enlarged to embrace all the other British possessions and dependencies and in October, 1904, the change of the title received Royal sanction, Royal Charter with Diploma granted in August, 1909. Her Majesty the Queen, Her Majesty Queen Alexandra H. R. H. Princess Louise, Dutches of Argyll, and H. R. H. the Duke of Connaught, are honorary members...." (pp. 161-62.) Unfortunately, World War One greatly curtailed the society's activities, and in spite of her acceptance into the group, it is likely that Edith Collier never exhibited with them while she was in Britain.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 20 March [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 1 April [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1918 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Edith Collier continued to attend the Royal Academy's annual exhibitions where she was able to view works by her mentor, Margaret Macpherson, and by Frances Hodgkins, Laura Knight, George Clausen, Arnesby Brown, and John Singer Sargent. Though the artists she most admired were the stars of the Academy exhibitions, she was also introduced at this time to a new set of women artists through the Society of Women Artists (S. W. A.). The S. W. A. showed the work of English painters like Lota Bowen, Dorothea Sharp, Alice Fanner, Grace Wheatley, Florence Small, Marcella Smith and Janet Fisher. This was a new group of women painters who took their painting seriously, offering useful networks of support and communication, teaching and exhibition beyond that of the art school. Collier attended the S. W. A. annual exhibitions in 1916 and 1917, and The Women's International Art Club (W. I. A. C.) and The National Portrait Society (N. P. S.) shows in 1917. At the W. I. A. C. and N. P. S., Edith Collier was introduced to the work of a bigger and perhaps more prestigious group of women artists including Ethel Walker, Ethel Sands, Silvia Gosse, Nina Hamnett and Annie L. Swynnerton. The longer Edith Collier stayed in Britain the more interested and involved she became in the round of London's annual exhibitions.

Swept along by her tutor's vigour and enthusiasm, she was happy to follow Margaret Macpherson's lead and accompany her on sketching and painting trips around Britain, and to Bonmahon in Southern Ireland. Margaret Macpherson took Edith Collier, in a party of twenty-one art students, to Bonmahon from March to September or October 1915. Bonmahon offered an ideal location for a summer school. Art students were able to stay and work at a relatively low cost because cheap food and lodgings were made available by poor peasant families. A 1938 *New Zealand Free Lance* article described the conditions in which Edith Collier lived on one of her visits, and stated:

When in Ireland at one of the tiny out-of-the-way bays they lived in a peasant's cottage. A ladder was placed for them to climb to the upper storey to bed, and when they were aloft it was taken away! Chickens and pigs shared the ground floor with the family, but for all that the girls [sic] enjoyed the novel surroundings and got some charming sketches. They were there when the war broke out, and the village constable eyed the party with the gravest suspicion!<sup>24</sup>

Having returned to Ireland with a clearer idea, this time, of what the community and location offered, and what she hoped to achieve while she was there, Edith wrote to her parents:

I am going to do some water colour this time. We are going to have models outside. I didn't paint any heads last time. Ireland is the country to paint. I sent Father a landscape only one not the other it cost too much to send them. The cottage you see in the foreground is quite nice inside they had a lot of old china and brass. An old lady over 80 used to live there, but I hear she has just died, so her daughter lives there alone.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "New Zealand Will See Kawhia Harbour". *New Zealand Free Lance*, 9 November, 1938, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 2 February [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Captivated by the beauty of the cottages which she stayed in, Edith Collier painted a number of them in oil and watercolour (see cat. nos. 226-228 and 234-238). Her Bonmahon works were not always received entirely enthusiastically at home:

....your 2nd picture of cottage of Bonmahon has arrived we have great arguments about the background, I say it is a hill in the distance but father says it is a plain, so will you explain next letter....<sup>26</sup>

A postcard from Edith Collier settled Eliza and Henry's debate about her picture:

I've sent father a lot of papers with the head mind tilt it forward and look at it I know it isn't smooth, but I never meant it to be. That is a hill at the back and everything in Ireland is falling down. Love to all from Edith.  
Cottages I mean.<sup>27</sup>

It is impossible to know with any certainty whether *The Little Irish Farmhouse* (see cat. no. 243) was the subject of this heated family debate, but the innovations implicit in the work make it very likely. It appears that the Collier family were confused in their reading of this painting by Edith Collier's early in-roads into modernism. The innovations present in her painting in 1915, particularly in landscape, were already alien and confusing to her parents, and no doubt the majority of the New Zealand public who shared their traditional taste in matters of aesthetics. The advanced language of her painting put her out of step with convention making her work incomprehensible to her family, who financed her studies and most wanted to see the benefits of their investment. The spatial ambiguity offered in the background of *The Little Irish Farmhouse* left them unsure about her intentions, and in doubt of the artistic credibility of the work. This painting is typical of a number of works produced by the artist which take a more modern approach to portraying the peasant dwellings of Bonmahon. These paintings are more decorative than they are representational, offering a new sense of flatness and an increasingly ambiguous treatment of figure and ground. Edith Collier's cottage paintings range from formally conceived and composed canvases, to newly experimental oils, loosely painted watercolour and tempera paintings, and quickly executed sketches.

Edith Collier and her colleagues were equally interested in the way of life of the people of Bonmahon:

It is Sunday and it has been a glorious day I'll tell you what I did today, in the morning I did some washing in the afternoon I went to church there were only sixteen there and it is a fair sized church the minister comes from Strabdvally about 4 miles from here, he comes on his bike and is an old man, he is

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 11 June 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>27</sup> Postcard from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, undated, 1915 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

a frightfully nervous man, but he is very pleased when we turn up to church. After church Miss De Gray and I went for a walk there are little villages dotted all over the place. You wouldn't know the people here on Sunday, they all turn out in their best....

I am painting a lovely old man just now, 92 is his age tomorrow, he is going to sea fishing.<sup>28</sup>

Her observations both visual, and in the letters she wrote, were usually a matter for great interest in the Collier household. Although she continued to produce works that challenged her family's ideas of what constitutes a well executed painting, Edith Collier sent over numerous works, of which they became fiercely proud, enthusiastically framing and displaying them on the walls of Ringley as visible signs of their daughter's talent and progress. Henry responded to the arrival of one such peasant picture, by writing:

The picture of the Irish peasant arrived this week - The family verdict was that it was very good - I think it shows a great advance on anything else you have done in this class of work.<sup>29</sup>

It was not only Edith Collier's father who thought that his daughter was reaching a creative peak in her career: the artist's teacher, Margaret Macpherson, was of a similar mind, and wrote to Eliza Collier from Bonmahon:

Miss Collier is working very hard. She will do good things and is sending to a London professional show early next year. I think you will be astonished at the quality of her work, naturally she did not send you out her best as she wants it for London early next year (this is the time when most of the shows are held).... As you know she has already shown a portrait in London.<sup>30</sup>

Wishing to extend and expand her students' skills and knowledge of art as much as possible, Margaret Macpherson also gave instruction in wood-block prints, etchings and monoprints. She was interested in the technical aspects of printing herself, and produced a number of her own etchings and monoprints while she was in Ireland, some of which she gave to her student Edith Collier. Edith Collier wrote to her parents of the monoprints she was producing:

I have just started doing monotype it is very interesting you do it on copper paint it on - you have to be very quick as the whole thing has to be done in half an hour or it is spoilt. After you put it on the copper you wet paper and roll it out and then put the paper on to the copper and roll again. You can only get one drawing. When I have done some more I'll send you two to show you what it looks like.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Henry Collier to Edith Collier, 25 August 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Margaret Macpherson to Eliza Collier, 2 August 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Anne Kirker dates this letter as being 1920, and this is incorrect. The letter which contains this extract was written from Bonmahon in 1915. Although, Edith Collier only wrote "11 May" on the letter and did not include the year, other information given establishes the year quite clearly. Edith Collier refers to her daily movements and events in Bonmahon, and also to the very recent sinking of the Lusitania which was torpedoed by a German U-boat on 7 May 1915, just days before.

Edith Collier's monoprints and woodblock prints (see cat. nos. 248-257), dealing mainly with village scenes and views of cottages and bridges in the area, documented the picturesque and some times bleak qualities of life in Bonmahon. It was traditionally regarded as appropriate and natural for women to be accomplished at a variety of cultural endeavours, and in art this often meant a variety of different media as well. In addition to this, modernism's break down of the traditional hierarchy of genre and atmosphere of experimentation in all media gave this practice additional authority.

Edith Collier was encouraged by the responses of her teacher and family to continue using the inhabitants of Bonmahon as significant subject matter. The artist's family eagerly awaited new insights into the life and people of the Irish fishing village:

Dad likes your Irish Biddy very much quite proud of you. They are very keen for you to sign name and place date and name of scene. He is looking forward to the old man's arrival.<sup>32</sup>

Edith Collier's *Peasant Woman of Bonmahon* (see cat. no. 188) shows a local woman, posed with hands crossed and positioned outside her cottage. This painting is candidly cropped and composed; its simplified tonal modulation and treatment of masses reflect a boldness of form and a brevity of detail not apparent in her earlier portraits. In *Peasant Woman of Bonmahon*, conventional perspective has been sacrificed in favour of a decorative treatment. In this work and a number of other portraits completed in Bonmahon, Edith Collier takes a traditional if not hackneyed nineteenth-century theme, that of the worthy but impoverished peasant, and applies a new Post-Impressionist vision. The artist undoubtedly admired the work of George Clausen, who established a reputation and long exhibition career at the Royal Academy using this subject matter. Edith Collier uses Clausen's single figure, but brings to it a new set of aesthetic criteria which elevate the formal issues of picture-making rather than constructing a sentimental narrative around poverty. The progressive nature of Edith Collier's *The Peasant Woman of Bonmahon* is most apparent when compared to Gladys Reynell's more conventional *Old Irish People* (1915), which was painted in Bonmahon at the same time, and probably uses the same model. Gladys Reynell's painting is cluttered with incident and empathy, showing little of the rigorous schematic simplification of Edith Collier's painting.

While Edith Collier continued to explore formal painterly issues along with the themes of peasant labour and ageing, her mother began to be less interested in what she considered to be the more morbid aspects of Irish life. Eliza tired of the constant revelations of hardship, and communicated this to Edith:

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<sup>32</sup> Letter from Dorothy Collier to Edith Collier, 1 September 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Your charcoal head of an Irish peasant has arrived, and we think it very good. Although not a great beauty by nature, it is a face that has seen hardships and poverty that you have brought out to perfection. I would like to see some of the Irish children now, beautiful and happy for a contrast.<sup>33</sup>

She worked for a time with child models such as Beatrice Porter, the sitter for *Girl in the Sunshine* (cat. no. 196), and an unknown young Irish boy who was the subject of *Little Schoolboy of Bonmahon* (cat. no. 195), *Irish School Boy* (cat. no. 198) and *Boy with Noah's Ark* (cat. no. 306). Two additional pencil sketches of unknown girls from Bonmahon were also produced, but did not result in finished works. Edith Collier worked in accordance with Eliza's recommendation, though her interest in more mature subjects remained.

Tomorrow I am starting a picture of an old man sitting by an old fashioned window mending a net, it is a large canvas. I have done mostly children - just going to do some pastelle [sic]....<sup>34</sup>

Edith Collier took photographs of the peasants and their cottages in Bonmahon. Although she had worked from photographs before, in the Irish fishing village she seems to use photography as an extension of her drawing and recording of the community rather than as images to copy from (see photos.: Vol. II, Section One). None of the 19 extant prints are exactly the same as any of the paintings or drawings she produced in Bonmahon, yet some are similar, and some certainly share the same models. A woman closely resembling the *Peasant Woman of Bonmahon* (see cat. no. 188) appears in six photographs, while a man identical to the model used in *An Irish Fisherman* (see cat. no. 191), is the subject of two portrait studies, and appears in three photographs with the *Peasant Woman*. Three more elderly female models are depicted outside their cottages, and one young woman, also outdoors, is photographed holding her baby. There is a blurred photograph of an elderly woman sitting in profile indoors, and five more photographs of buildings, cottages, and stone walls round the village. They would have remained as a valuable reference point for future work. Incidentally, these images testify to the intense poverty of the inhabitants of Bonmahon. Receiving, at last, the parcel of clothes sent from Wanganui, Margaret Macpherson wrote:

Miss Collier has been good enough to let me dispense some of the clothes you so generously sent. I cannot tell you how much they were appreciated. It is almost inconceivable poverty here - A family of 9 is the ordinary course of events, and the father never hopes to earn more than 7/- a week, how they feed them I don't know.

Their attitude of mind is to me curious, as they are very decently grateful for kindnesses and look upon themselves as heroines for having the baker's dozen of infants. One father and mother after having collected 10 have died and left them to be looked after by the 3 eldest 16, 17, 18 years old - These people are consumptives - A lot of your clothes went to cover their nakedness. We have tried to give the clothes to the orphans as much as possible and one very scarecrow nice but awfully ragged looking child, was turned into a smart little Newzealander [sic], he had the rough tweed coat turned up to fit him, a grey flannel shirt (he had always although 9 years old worn a girl's blouse back to front for a

<sup>33</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 24 August 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>34</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Henry Collier, 5 July [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

shirt before this) a smart felt hat a pair of stockings and a pair of boots - his appearance simply startled his friends and acquaintances - also himself a little I fancy, as he touches this [sic] hat to me when I meet him. His father brought a young consumptive wife to die at his mother's cabin and then simply disappeared - so you see he is almost an orphan, and is generally known as the "English Orphan". The little woolen [sic] shirt came in for a baby who made the 13th on its arrival a few days ago - the eldest in the family is 17 -

This little place is certainly Matrimony without the rice. n confetti [sic].<sup>35</sup>

Edith Collier was concerned about the social implications for women and children of life in Southern Ireland, and had written to her mother in the hope that she might make some tangible contribution to help alleviate some of the poverty and suffering in Bonmahon. Eliza sent out a parcel of clothes to the Irish fishing village in response to their request. On 24 August 1915 Eliza wrote a letter in anticipation of her package's safe arrival, and listed her answers and reactions to Edith Collier's questions and news:

...4th- I hope by next letter to hear that the clothes have arrived and distributed to the family of orphans. 5th- It was satisfactory to know that your teacher had been a pupil of good artists. 6th- Now for the old bicke [sic] 17/6 what a bargain, you were always good at driving a bargain.<sup>36</sup>

Ever eager that she and her family should be involved in philanthropic concerns, Eliza reminded Edith Collier of her Christian duty and encouraged her sense of social responsibility. She was mindful of what she considered to be the potentially wayward influences of the Irish, and said, "I hope you won't be getting superstitious living with the Irish folk you know it is very infectious."<sup>37</sup> Concerned that even her husband might be putting material wealth before charitable compassion, she wrote in June 1915:

I want him to sell the "up river place" it takes up too much time and money that he should be devoting to charitable purposes as there are so many calls in connection with the war. You might be able to help these poor people in Bonmahon, but money always seems scarce.<sup>38</sup>

By involving themselves in charitable affairs, Edith Collier and Margaret Macpherson continued to operate in a role appropriate to the feminine persona. In actively seeking assistance on behalf of the poor and underprivileged of Bonmahon, as well as pursuing their work, the two artists could address conflicting issues of role and conscience. While R.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Margaret Macpherson to Eliza Collier, dated 2 August [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. In a letter dated 22 June 1915, Eliza adds a post script, saying: "hope the clothes arrive all right I will send some more if they suit." Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. It appears that Margaret Macpherson and Edith Collier took the "English Orphan" boy back to England with them when they left Bonmahon. A letter from an Irish friend, M. Culan [possibly Cullinan], states: "I think its very kind of you to take that boy with you twould be a good chance for him to have a good home." Letter from M. Culan [Cullinan], 27 August [1916 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 24 August 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>37</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 20 July 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 25 June 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Herdman Smith recommended to male painters, at the New Zealand International Exhibition of 1906, that

The painter who draws his subjects from incidents of everyday life must be a man entirely at sympathy with his models and their surroundings; be he a painter of peasantry, he must enter into their joys and sorrows - in fact, must be for the time one of themselves.<sup>39</sup>

women like Edith Collier and Margaret Macpherson found it impossible to "enter into peasant joys and sorrows" without feeling responsible for trying to alleviate their poverty. With feelings of philanthropic responsibility internalised as part of the socialisation of middle-class girls, additional reinforcement and pressure from authority figures bolstered early conditioning, ensuring that well-to-do young women continued to see the giving of charity as a social obligation and part of their role.

As the art students' time in Bonmahon proceeded, the effects of war began to encroach on their everyday activities:

Three days ago south from here a German submarine came up to a fishing boat and took the fish and left them. I said south, but I meant north between here and Waterford, south 2 or 3 miles from here they picked up a mine.

I'll send you a paper about the Lusitania isn't [sic] ghastly these Huns are getting worse, they have sunk a lot of boats this last fortnight. Over here the people seem to talk and worry over the war far more than they do in London.<sup>40</sup>

Margaret Macpherson received a notice that stated:

No member of the public is permitted to sketch or to make photographs of the coast. Any attempt to do so is to be stopped at once and be reported to me by telegraph.<sup>41</sup>

With such restrictions placed on their activities, the Bonmahon school gradually disbanded, students like Edith Collier returning to their studies at St. John's Wood, and Margaret Macpherson and Gladys Reynell taking up a new studio in London.

Charlie Ayliff's plans were disrupted and she was unable to make it over to Ireland before the party left. She wrote to Edith Collier on 12 August 1915:

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in G. H. Brown, *New Zealand Painting 1900-1920: Traditions and Departures*. Wellington, 1972, p. 40.

<sup>40</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. The Lusitania is a British ocean liner that was sunk by a German submarine on 7 May 1915. This event contributed indirectly to the entry of the United States in World War One. The 32,000-ton ship was returning from New York to Liverpool, with 1,959 passengers and crew aboard. The sinkings of merchant ships off the southern coast of Ireland, and reports of submarine activity in the region, encouraged the British Admiralty to warn the Lusitania to avoid the area. The ship's crew, however, chose to ignore the warning, and as a result the ocean liner was struck by a U-boat torpedo. The ship sank within 20 minutes and as a consequence 1,198 people died, 128 being U. S. citizens.

<sup>41</sup> This notice was written on an undated official Navy Signal form. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.



....it will always be the disappointment of my life that I didn't go to Ireland, still I may be able to do so next year if I am still in this here frail mortal flesh.... We are going to be here for another fortnight and then go to Eastcote where an uncle has a lot to do with a V. A. D. hospital, we will help there as far as we are able until we deem it time for our return to the common task, namely, the Wood, I've got so many new ideas I'm longing to try them on the models.... I can't say what will happen after that, I expect my fond relations will be shouting for me to go back again, how much longer are you going to be here?<sup>42</sup>

On her return to England in September or October 1915, Edith Collier faced this very question. While her confidence might well have been shaken by her apparent failure to pass her teaching examination in January 1916,<sup>43</sup> she still seems eager to remain in Britain and to continue working with her friends and studying under Margaret Macpherson. She wrote to her parents in the opening months of 1916:

I expect you got a surprise to get my cable that I have just sent. I am trying to know if Harry is coming, if he is I would like to stay till Sept. Miss Macpherson is going to a village near London so I would like to get a bit of English landscape. I have been wondering whether to come home now at least July but someone said wait a bit; so I left it to you.<sup>44</sup>

Eliza responded without encouragement:

We were amused at your cable asking to stay till Sept. I felt a bit disappointed as we were looking for your coming shortly. Now it will be about Xmas before you get here, of course there will be a great deal of expense to get the flyer [Harry, her son in the air force] going, so that it will come hard on Father's purse to have to find cheques for two of you, also for Reg [fighting in France] although they get their pay from Government it doesn't seem sufficient to keep a Collier going.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of her mother's reservations, by July 1916 Edith Collier was at Cotswold House, Bibury, in Gloucester.

In the summer of 1916 Margaret Macpherson, accompanied by Gladys Reynell and a group of students, including Edith Collier, went to the fourteenth-century Cotswold hamlet of Bibury. While Roger Butler notes that William Morris declared Bibury was the most beautiful hamlet in the "whole of England",<sup>46</sup> Edith Collier had her reservations, preferring the stark beauty of Ireland to the cultivated quaintness of Bibury. However, in spite of her continued commitment to Bonmahon, she stayed at Bibury for more than a month, producing numerous painted scenes and sketches of the picturesque village and surrounding countryside (see cat.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Charlie Ayliff to Edith Collier, 12 August 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>43</sup> A transcript of grades from The Royal Drawing Society for her Teacher's Certificate show that she had very successful results in all but one of her 'Actual Drawing' options, but was unsuccessful in gaining a full pass in the 'Theory of Teaching' and 'Practical Class Teaching'. There are no other later transcript sheets to suggest that she re-sat this examination, and there is no teaching certificate among her comprehensive archives.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 10 April [1916 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 16 April 1916. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>46</sup> R. Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 9.

nos. 270-276). The architecture of Arlington Row, the stone bridges crossing the River Coln, and Arlington Mill provided Edith Collier with ample subject matter for her work. The works Edith Collier produced during her stay in the Cotswolds reflect an increased commitment to, and understanding of, modernist ideas. What is striking about many of these works is their simplicity and decorative flatness. Edith Collier's Bibury works reflect a new attitude to pictorial space, which is more compressed than in any of her earlier works. In this series there is also a new honesty to materials. Charcoal is used boldly and uncompromisingly with no effort being made to conceal the mark-making below a thin veil of illusionism. In paintings such as *Bibury* (see cat. no. 271) areas of canvas are left bare, and brush-marks are made explicitly and self-consciously, while in works like *A Village Pump* (see cat. no. 270) colour is applied with poster-like flatness, offering no intermediate modulations of tone or hue. Edith Collier's Bibury works represent her most cohesively modern group of works to date, yet even amongst this set there are some that border on the purely representational.

The sketching and painting trip was made in the height of summer, which explains why most of the works were produced out-doors. At Bibury there is a clear emphasis on architecture, rather than portraiture. Edith Collier produced none of the powerful portrait studies which are an outstanding feature of her work in Bonmahon. Edith Collier and her colleagues worked closely together, sharing ideas, iconography, and even finished works. She had in her possession on her return to New Zealand etchings made at Bibury by Margaret Macpherson, and it is likely that the two artists exchanged prints. Etching was yet another printing skill that Margaret Macpherson decided to teach at her second summer school. In Bonmahon she had introduced students to the monoprint; in Bibury it was etching. Under Margaret Macpherson's direction, Edith Collier produced a set of four etchings from sites around Bibury (see cat. nos. 294-297). Although these works do not show the same kind of innovations present in her paintings and drawings of this period, they do illustrate her obvious capacity to work in this medium, and provide a competent record of the tiny rustic stone and tile cottages which are a well-known feature of this region. A fact which would, no doubt, have appealed greatly to her parents.

Returning to her attic studio in autumn 1916, Edith Collier continued to paint, receiving private tuition from Margaret Macpherson. She also resumed her efforts to achieve more exhibiting experience and exposure. Edith Collier gained membership of the Society of Women Artists (S. W. A.). Founded in 1857, the S. W. A., was originally informal in character, and held its meetings in the private rooms of its members. By the time Edith Collier first involved herself with the society, sixty-three consecutive exhibitions had been held in public galleries. Edith Collier and Margaret Macpherson exhibited with the S. W. A.

in March 1917, and were both singled out for special critical mention. The critic Frank Rutter, who wrote for the *Sunday Times*, commented:

One of the best exhibits in the central gallery is Miss Macpherson's "In Door Still Life" (198), which is well balanced both in design and colour... E. M. Collier's "Rocks at Bonmahon" (186) is excellently composed and the forms are cleverly simplified.<sup>47</sup>

Another review of the exhibition in *Colour* magazine stated that:

The Society of Women Artists, exhibiting in Suffolk Street, have arranged a varied exhibition as well as possible. It is true that there are many exhibits of a weaker and commonplace character, but there is enough good work to reward the visitor. The presence of pictures by Alice Fanner, Dorothea Sharpe, Margaret Macpherson and A. K. Browning in the Central room would alone make it attractive, but there are other pictures, such as... works by Janet Fisher, Lota Bowen, E. M. Collier, Violet Wilson and Florence Small.<sup>48</sup>

Although Edith Collier had spent the last four years working hard to produce good art, and had faced financial hardships and pressure to return home, this critical notice was the first public sign that her efforts might not be in vain. Edith Collier was far more connected with her work than she allowed herself to make obvious. She sold little and gave her work away rarely,<sup>49</sup> and then only to close friends and relations. Her actions at this stage were not those of a casual amateur. Like many women artists before her, Edith Collier hoped the S. W. A. might offer a spring-board from which to launch a serious exhibiting career in London. It seemed that the S. W. A. could open up options and make inroads into an art world which otherwise appeared to be a closed system.

For well over a year after her return to London from Bonmahon, Edith Collier continued to correspond with women she had met and become friendly with in Ireland. Keeping up with news and exchanging gifts and postcards, Edith Collier and her Irish friends hoped that they might one day live and work together again in Bonmahon. Bridie Reidy, an Irish friend, wrote on 14 March 1917 and responded to news of Edith Collier's success at the S. W. A.:

I am so glad to get your letter and hear news of you. I often thought of you since the great explosion in London and wonder if you got a fright though it was not near your district. That was good news about your picture. I am so glad you must be feeling very proud and I am sure that Miss Macpherson is delighted I am so glad you told me. I hope your brother [Harry] has arrived safely by this [time] are they not wonderful all they are sacrificing and coming such a distance too we don't half appreciate those abroad.... It is good to hear we may see you again you will be heartily welcome it would be great if you and Miss Macpherson and Reynell came over. I was half afraid they were gone off somewhere.... I am posting you a few shamrocks and also to my other friends the shamrock is not so nice this year the weather has been too awful I have chilblains on my hands as I write and they are a bother.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Frank Rutter, "The Galleries: Society of Women Artists". *Sunday Times*, March 1917. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>48</sup> "The Society of Women Artists". *Colour*, March 1917, p. XV.

<sup>49</sup> This makes an interesting contrast to the practice and experiences of Frances Hodgkins, who sent work back to New Zealand to exhibit and sell. Hodgkins was entrepreneurial enough in her ambitions, and confident enough about her work and abilities to see this as a realistic option.

<sup>50</sup> Letter from Bridie Reidy to Edith Collier, 14 March 1917. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

In spite of the praise of her family and friends, Edith Collier had already destroyed many of her early paintings and sketches: "I burnt a lot of the daubs I did the first year no good, but I kept some although bad just to show you"<sup>51</sup> she told her parents in 1915. Some of her later efforts were accidentally destroyed:

I have just spoilt 3 months work I was sweeping out the studio had the thing in front of the fire and burnt it, well it doesn't matter.

I was going to pack all my things and sent [sic] them out now only if Harry is coming I would like him to see what I have been doing because they might get lost. I have decided to store them and wait a bit.<sup>52</sup>

Anxious to receive the responses and approval of her family at home, Edith Collier sent off as many of her works as she could pack up and afford to ship. Only the threat of the destruction of her paintings by German submarines made her hesitate to risk sending them. Although Edith Collier did not have the self-confidence to feel absolutely positive about her work, and struggled throughout her career to see anything more than a private and personal value in what she did, she was able while in Britain to view her work as having a potential public import or significance, and was eager to have her parents share in this ambition and proclaim its worth.

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<sup>51</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 20 March [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>52</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza Collier, 10 April [1916 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Ideas, Innovation and Armistice: 1917-1919

As the war in Europe intensified, civilian casualties from air raids and bombing over London increased the danger even for those who remained outside the main theatre of conflict. In fact, by "August [1916] Zeppelin raids in England reached such a pitch that squadrons of fighters were hastily diverted from overseas to deal with the menace, with no little success."<sup>1</sup> Edith Collier's brother Harry was numbered amongst the men who enlisted in New Zealand, and were shipped over to Britain early in 1917 to fly as fighter pilots against the German forces.<sup>2</sup> Mutually respectful of each other's skills and talents,<sup>3</sup> Edith Collier and her brother Harry enjoyed a close and supportive relationship which started as children and continued through their teens and early adult years. Now the bond between brother and sister was perhaps made stronger by the fact that they were thousands of miles from family and friends, facing a war that daily numbered its victims, both civilian and military, in the hundreds and sometimes thousands. Edith Collier experienced constant disappointments over the delay in her brother Harry's arrival, and decided to put off her departure once more as she waited for news of him. Edith Collier was fiercely proud of her brother's contribution to the war effort, as evidenced in letters to their parents:

Harry was up last Sunday and stayed alnight [sic] here, he was studying hard the whole time and went up for an exam, yesterday and I do hope he gets through alright, they have very little time for study up at 5 'o' clock for drill and for each subject they have to tramp about to different places. Two or three nights a week bomb throwing. They have to know all the different movements of the army and all sorts of signals to the Infantry and Artillery... and draw maps - that is just a little they have to learn... of course he hasn't

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<sup>1</sup> S. Sillars, *Art and Survival in First World War Britain*. Basingstoke, 1987, p.10.

<sup>2</sup> Harry joined Edith Collier in Britain sometime around 28 March 1917. Initially, Harry attended aviation school, but soon graduated and was given a plane of his own. Writing to Edith Collier, he states: "I like my machine which is allotted to me it is a brand new bus. Also my observer is an old hand at the game and a very nice sort of chap. We won't have any trouble in getting along together. I've been along the line two or three times seen hunks about their houses but not scrapped with any. Not looking for it either." Letter from Harry Collier to Edith Collier, 4 October 1917. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Harry was awarded the Military Cross for his services in World War One.

<sup>3</sup> There seems to have been a great deal of fondness for Edith Collier on Harry's part, and it appears that the fondness was mutually felt by both brother and sister.

seen much of London when he comes up to London he stays here, he likes the small rooms I have on the roof.<sup>4</sup>

Although Edith Collier was exposed to a great deal of male company during this period with frequent visits from Harry, her other brothers, cousins, and their friends staying at Leinster Square, she seems to have been as reluctant as ever to involve herself in anything other than platonic relationships with men in spite being urged by her sisters in New Zealand to find a suitable male partner. Her sister Dorothy wrote from Wanganui:

I saw Gerty Twgood today with a fat baby. My Ed you'll have to hurry or you'll be the only one left.<sup>5</sup>

Another sister, Vera Collier, wrote:

I suppose you will be bringing home an earl or Duke or somethink [sic] of the sort we won't mind if it is a prince.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, her mother's correspondence included unpleasant stories about male conduct in Wanganui. Edith Collier responded to such stories with the comment:

You were saying I hope telling you all this won't make you a man hater Edith, well hardly when I have a good father and 5 jolly descent [sic] brothers and all the men relations over here seem to be very nice.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear however that she still had little interest in marrying or attaching herself to a man. Beyond the males of her family, Edith Collier tended to have little regard for the men she came in contact with. She was committed to her career in art and her way of life as a single woman, and saw in the institution of marriage an inevitable confinement and curtailing of her freedom and ambitions. Some of her closest acquaintances, her cousin Fannie and Margaret Macpherson, gave Edith Collier examples of female partnerships working to advance a career. This would certainly have given her the idea that support and companionship could be gained from liaisons other than marriage.

While Margaret Macpherson had been teaching and giving criticisms of students' work in London, she and Gladys Reynell had also been attending classes in pottery at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts. Macpherson and Reynell moved to Pentewan, Cornwall, where in late 1917 or early 1918 they set up a pottery. Maintaining contact by writing and staying, on occasions, with Margaret Macpherson and Gladys Reynell, Edith Collier continued to gain

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 4 April 1917. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Dorothy Collier to Edith Collier, 1 September 1915. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Gerty Twgood was a friend of the Collier sisters who lived in Wanganui.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Vera Collier to Edith Collier, 18 September 1916. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier [?] undated, 1915-1916 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

advice from her mentor in spite of their differing physical locations. Gladys' brother Rupert Reynell,<sup>8</sup> after working in Pentewan for only a matter of months, managed to convince his sister, and her companion, that they should "come and work with him at the recently established Seale-Hayne Hospital, situated in a newly built agricultural college four kilometres from Newton Abbot in Devon."<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, the pair now built a second pottery in the college dairy sheds where they taught shell-shocked soldiers to turn clay pots, use glazes, produce wood block prints, and weave baskets.

Around the time that Margaret Macpherson and Gladys Reynell were establishing themselves in Devon, Edith Collier began working in London with the female nude. Knowing the historical significance and artistic status conferred by this genre, Edith Collier was careful to make the most of the opportunities that London offered. "For some time I haven't taken lessons worked on my own and taken a few lessons on design and next week till Xmas I want to have a figure model I haven't had a [illegible word] on that yet. I won't be able to get figures in Wanganui,"<sup>10</sup> she wrote to her parents. Edith Collier realised her ambition by working with models posed in her own attic bedroom. *Kitty* (see cat. no. 319) and *Girl Sitting on a Bed* (see cat. no. 318) show how she used this setting as a convenient and even appropriate backdrop for her work. These studies are intimate and unselfconscious revelations of female nakedness, the subjects not so much sexual objects as the natural focus of the pictures' over-all pattern and design. Sharing similar elements such as a patterned bedspread, mirror and bed end, both the pastel and oil painting distribute these features to enhance the work's decorative appeal. Edith Collier was obviously amused by the impression news of her work was making on her youngest sister:

I was very pleased to get your letter last week. I did laugh at you having to tell the class in French about me and my art. Just at present I am doing figure drawing in lead pencil and charcoal and ink. I am having a brush up on it till Xmas never had a figure over [illegible word] before, but I particularly want practice in it.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Rupert Reynell was a military doctor at the Seale-Hayne Hospital. Gladys Reynell's brother Crew died at Gallipoli in August 1915 and her sister Emily was a volunteer nurse, so as the war proceeded Gladys Reynell came under more and more pressure from her family to make a contribution to the war effort herself. Writing to her father in Australia complaining of Gladys' reluctance to participate, Rupert Reynell writes: "Gladys' attitude is testing comprehension- I can't think of any possible explanation and I am very sorry indeed about it." Quoted in Roger Butler's, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 10. Writing to his father again after being more successful in his persuasions, Rupert Reynell states: "Gladys and Margaret are coming to teach pottery to the patients here - they were here last week prospecting." Quoted in Roger Butler's, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberrers, 1987, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 15 August [1917-18 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Bethea Collier, 20 September [1917-1919 ?] Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

Leading up to the Christmas of 1918, Edith Collier hired a young female model who was to become the central motif in a new and decidedly innovative series of works. She sent a parcel of these drawings and paintings to Margaret Macpherson in Newton Abbot for comment on the new directions she was taking. Margaret Macpherson responded in her usual teacherly fashion:

First your work-

1. the nude, the girl before the glass is excellent, try that on a show, see what is going before the Women's [Society of Women Artists] and if you don't get it in try it on the Women's [Women's International Art Club]---see if there is to be an "International". Look up your book and see. I don't know whether there is to be a "New English [Art Club]" or not.... The figure of the little girl and baby is most amusing the best is the one with the red floor but can't you do away with the black spots and get the bed connected with the figures some other way? The spotting takes away the design and gives a jumpy appearance. It isn't simple enough - I like the Idea Immensely - mind you get the movement of the baby the same as in the red one. The cardboard sketch baby is stiff and uninteresting. The girl on the bed has too many colours, suggest colour.... Again simplify - As design your work has improved immensely. The sketches are poor - in quality and technique. Your line etchings don't suggest either line or colour they are dull - look at the Rembrandt [sic] etchings at the library of the Museum or Whistlers. I fancy South Kensington might have some but think all the originals are at the Museum at Tate. Also the Goya's - Your drawings are good - The model is fairly bony isn't she? but I really remember her as her arms [are] matches - I notice in your drawings you have mostly exaggerated her length of body and sacrificed her arms to it - watch this - otherwise the style and drawing will do. I really congratulate you on your standing girl....

Now about your coming down - Let us know a fortnight before you want to come and we can put you up for a week or so you can sketch or come to the Hospital, come when you like. Do you want any beads to give away for Xmas - ? they are made by the boys - (pottery) 1/6 a necklace - I cannot send your work before next Sat. as we will be going to the Post then.

now I must stop - and come when you like.<sup>12</sup>

Margaret Macpherson maintained a delicate balance between constructive criticism and domination by encouraging, yet also being openly critical of any weaknesses. Referring to untitled pencil studies of female nudes (see cat. nos. 322-336), Margaret Macpherson acknowledges the beginning for Edith Collier of a new and more sophisticated approach to portraying the female nude. Moving away from her earlier art school methods, Edith Collier encapsulates in these sketches a refined elegance and aesthetic grace that is not implicit in her St. John's Wood studies (see cat. nos. 127-129). Using the same *Lady of Kent* model, she draws her subject lying on a bed assuming a complicated foreshortened position (see cat. no. 329), then paints her on a canvas entitled *The Lady of Kent* (see cat. no. 321). Strangely whimsical in its conception, the sight of a naked female sitting on the grass by a lake presents more questions than it answers. By confronting the viewer with a woman stiffly posed and sinewy, Edith Collier challenges conventional notions of what constitutes an ideal female physique. This challenge to traditional constructs of femininity is further amplified by the ambiguous treatment of the female form, which is consciously distorted. Placed close to the front of the canvas, the figure is viewed against a background which seems decoratively

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<sup>12</sup> Letter from Margaret Macpherson to Edith Collier, 15 November [1918 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.



drawn in, with areas of simple colour separated and detailed with black lines. This work has clearly been influenced by the conventions of Post-Impressionism, which, in its essence, advocates an exploration of the decorative qualities of simplified pattern, colour and form. These qualities are clearly present in the work of Paul Gauguin's *Loss of Virginity* (1890-91) and his *Manao tupapau* (1894) making them an interesting comparison to *The Lady of Kent*. *Loss of Virginity* shares *The Lady of Kent*'s high sky-line, strange whimsical mood and symbolic elements, and an unexplained title. All three paintings take the reclining female nude as their subject, and in their compositions negotiate the delicate balance between simplified form and areas of decorative detail. Although it is unlikely that Edith Collier saw *Loss of Virginity* in London, she may well have seen reproductions of *Manao tupapau* which was shown at the First Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1910-1911. *The Lady of Kent* was a decidedly innovative painting in Edith Collier's oeuvre at this time, and it was first exhibited in London at the Society of Women Artists show in 1918, where it received favourable attention from the *Times* critic, who stated: "Miss E. M. Collier's "The Lady of Trent" [sic] (217) has a charming landscape background to a amusing doll-like nude figure."<sup>13</sup> From this point on, Edith Collier worked more independently of instruction with the possible exception of an occasional evening class at the Slade.<sup>14</sup>

In Edith Collier's work with the nude, two significant shows of modern European art in 1919 no doubt had a strong impact. In August 1919 she viewed an *Exhibition of French Art 1914-1919* at the Mansard Gallery, and in November or December attended the exhibition *Matisse and Maillol at the Leicester Galleries*. These shows would have been a rich revelation of visual information about modernism for Edith Collier. While she had followed diligently Margaret Macpherson's suggestions, advice and opinions of modern art, this was Edith Collier's first chance to view a significant group of European modernist works first hand. It is likely that Edith Collier missed both of Frank Rutter's 1913 shows, one entitled *Post-Impressionism Pictures and Drawings*, and held at the Leeds Arts Club, and the other the *Post-Impressionist and Futurist Exhibition*, which opened at the Doré Galleries in London. She would also have missed the exhibition of *Twentieth-Century Art: A Review of Modern*

<sup>13</sup> "Society of Women Artists", *The Times*, 4 March 1918, n. p. Archives of the Women's Art Library, Fulham Palace London. In spite of its positive reception *The Lady of Kent* (see cat. no. 321) did not sell at its listed price of £ 7.70. The work remained in the artist's possession and was subsequently exhibited in New Zealand at the New Zealand Society of Arts show in 1927.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Kirker states that: "In 1918 and 1919 Edith Collier worked mostly on her own. The artist occasionally hired models who posed in her attic room at Leinster Square and in addition she attended life classes at the Slade." *New Zealand Women Artists*. Auckland, 1986, p. 62. It may be correct that Edith Collier attended the Slade during this period, or it could be possible that her Slade studies were pursued prior to, or around 1916. In a letter written after Edith Collier returned to London in 1914 or 1915, she states "Got a lot of cards from Irish friends Xmas... 2 nights a week I go to [illegible] art school. It is not a class and there is a model for you... I have been twice and like it. The people are far more advanced than at St. John's. Have put 2 or 3 things in St. John's Wood Exhibition." Postcard from Edith Collier to A. Bland, undated, 1915-1916 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

*Movements* held at the Whit Chapel Art Gallery in East London in June 1914. Although she had the opportunity to view the work of artists based in Britain during the war, it was not until the *Exhibition of French Art 1914-1919*, which included the work of Friesz, Vlaminck, André Dérain, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Modigliani, Suzanne Valadon, Soutine, Fernand Leger, L'hote, Dufy and Archipenko, that she saw an extensive collection of work by the European avant-garde. The show consisted of 177 works, 19 of which were pottery and sculpture. Henri Matisse's contribution included *Lady with rings* (35), *Nude* (36), *Lady on a terrace* (37), and *Flower piece* (38), while Suzanne Valadon exhibited *Gabrielle* (56), *Portrait Group* (57) and *Nudes* (58). Picasso's two paintings were *Still Life* (39) and *Landscape* (40), and while still life painting largely dominated the show, André Dérain and Amedeo Modigliani's contributions both included nudes. In his preface to the show, Arnold Bennett described it as being "widely Continental [having been] collected from France, Spain, Poland, Russia, Italy and Norway. It is the first of its kind since the war; and in my opinion it is the best of its kind at any rate since the celebrated exhibition at the Grafton many years ago."<sup>15</sup> Though not as big in scale, nor containing quite the same shockingly innovative material as the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition, this show certainly marked the end of the long isolation from Europe brought about by the First World War.

The show of works by Matisse and Maillol at the Leicester Galleries had a catalogue introduction written by the late Guillaume Apollinaire, and the exhibition included a selection of 51 paintings, drawings, woodcuts, and lithographs by Matisse, and drawings, and terracotta and bronze statuettes by Maillol. While Suzanne Valadon,<sup>16</sup> André Dérain and Modigliani might all have influenced her in some way at this time, Matisse's work particularly seems to have changed Edith Collier's approach to painting the nude. Although he had been very harshly reviewed by the press on previous occasions in Britain, this new show at the Leicester Galleries was heralded as a considerable success and Matisse's reputation in London as a modern "master" became more firmly established. It is possible that the more positive reception of Matisse's painting encouraged Edith Collier to consider his innovations seriously and to see this as an avenue for further developments in her own work. "The many [paintings] drawings and prints that he sent for the show have not been identified",<sup>17</sup> however, it is certainly possible to speculate on the stylistic developments evident in these exhibitions based on other works produced by Matisse around this time. Paintings like *Pastorale* (1905),

<sup>15</sup> *Catalogue of Exhibition of French Art 1914-1919*. Mansard Gallery, London, 1919.

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting that, although Edith Collier was very positive about women's art and chose to have women tutors as her mentors in Britain, she does not appear to have taken particular note of the work of Suzanne Valadon. She seems to have been primarily influenced by Matisse, in spite of seeing one of Valadon's bold and unconventional paintings of the female nude. Perhaps Valadon's greatest influence was that of role model, as Edith Collier would have been greatly encouraged to see a woman's work hanging in a prestigious London gallery as part of a consciously avant-garde show.

<sup>17</sup> A. Gruetzner Robins, *Modern Art in Britain 1910-1914*. London, 1997, p. 176.

*Nude (Black and Gold)* (1908), *Nymph and Satyr* (1908-10), *Music* (1909), and paintings and sketches of *The Dance* executed between 1909-1910 would certainly have influenced Edith Collier, and encouraged her decision in 1919 or 1920 to shift her emphasis away from the life model, and towards the work of artists like Matisse:

....takes a guinea or more or £2.5.0 some charge and by the time you got a model it would take a fortune of course I have been going to exhibitions and seeing what they are doing. I have been drawing for the last year / figure / I feel I have learnt a lot working on my own....<sup>18</sup>

Paintings like *Figures at Pool* (see cat. no. 346), *Frivolity* (see cat. no. 347) and *Folly* (see cat. no. 348) reflect the radical change that occurred in Edith Collier's vision at this time. These paintings are more decorative than they are representational. Instead of portraying the figure literally as had been taught at St. John's Wood, these works abstract the human form conveying a sense of its essence and energy rather than its anatomical structure or detail. While Edith Collier's paintings do not adopt a Post-Fauvist approach to colour, *Figures at Pool* shares with Matisse's *The Dance* (1910) a sense of weightless floating energy and rapture. *Frivolity* and *Folly* exhibit a similar sense of weightlessness, yet these works have been influenced equally by Japanese art. Edith Collier owned two journals on Japanese art, one untitled, and the other the monthly magazine *Shin-Bijutsukai*. She also owned two substantial books on Japanese and Chinese art, one by Stephen W. Buscell entitled *Chinese Art* (1914), and another by Ernest F. Fenollosa called *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design* (1913). These were used as a further point of reference for works like *Frivolity* and *Folly*. In addition to her books on Asian art, Edith Collier's already extensive library included Clive Bell's *Art* (1915), which emphatically asserted the contribution to Western art of Cézanne, and other more 'advanced' and modern texts and magazines. From this time on Edith Collier's book purchases became more discriminating, and more closely linked to events on the contemporary European art scene.

In addition to exciting and innovative exhibitions, Edith Collier continued to extend the range of shows that she visited. In 1919 she attended the Summer show of the Royal Society of Painters in Watercolours (R. S. P. W.), The International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers (I. S. S. P. G.), and in 1917, 1918, and 1919 she went to see The National Portrait Society's (N. P. S.) annual exhibitions at the Grosvenor Gallery. The N. P. S. exhibitions had a particular interest for Edith Collier because, while her work with the female nude and efforts to experiment with modernism were largely a private preoccupation, her portrait painting and

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<sup>18</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1919-1920 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

drawing was gaining her an encouraging degree of public recognition. The editor of *The Hippodrome* magazine wrote in February 1918:

We should like the pleasure of publishing an article on you with portraits in our series "British Artists and their Work". Can you receive our Mr H. Gordon-Lloyd on Saturday about 1.30 o' clock. We await to hear.<sup>19</sup>

This request was followed by a second in March 1920, suggesting that Edith Collier might have been included in a second "British Artists and their Work" series. This seems to have come to nothing, however.

Edith Collier continued to paint portraits while living in London, but did not have easy access to the expressive character studies that had captured her imagination in Bonmahon, St. Ives and Wales. She found that children were more affordable as models than adults, and produced quite a volume of work involving younger sitters. In spite of her preference for older sitters, Edith Collier's portrait studies of children are handled as competently as any of her other paintings. She still wished to mix the artistic and the philanthropic, and wrote to her mother:

As far as helping people go I met plenty through our models. We were doing a little girl both her brothers are killed one seriously wounded [sic] they have no father and the mother goes out working and the sad part of it is that the girl has consumption so we thought we had better not go on with her she is coming back at the end of the week for some things.<sup>20</sup>

Whether this young model was the subject of *Girl, Mirror and Sweet William* (see cat. no. 307) or not is unclear, but she certainly was one of a number of children sitting at this time for Edith Collier and her colleagues. Again, this portrait shows the influence of Post-Impressionist innovations. The painting makes a bright almost decorative use of colour. The young model is placed in front of a frieze-like background of Sweet William. The canvas is strangely divided by the strong black line of a mirror to the sitter's left. The overwhelming impression of this work is one of decorative flatness, which is largely due to the lack of tonal modelling, and the uniformity of attention to both model and background which inevitably creates spatial ambiguities between figure and ground.

Though Edith Collier maintained her strong commitment to portraiture, on the whole she did not pursue this genre with the intention of selling. She was always reluctant to part with any of her work, and the reasons for this are complex. Edith Collier valued her creative endeavours above the small profit that she could make from a sale. She saw each work as a

<sup>19</sup> Letter from the editor of *The Hippodrome* to Edith Collier, 28 February 1918. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 10 April [1916 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

link in the chain of her development as an artist, and as a visual record of her precious time abroad, and therefore was never prepared to view her oeuvre as a saleable commodity. Paradoxically, on one hand she valued what she did above the price of a sale, and on the other she lacked the confidence to publicly assert its worth. This dichotomy of the private and public value that Edith Collier gave to her work is a factor that made it difficult for her to bridge the gap between the amateur and professional artist. In essence the professional artist must at some point begin to see their work as a commodity with a market value and public worth. Edith Collier maintained a sentimental attachment to what she produced which intensified over time rather than reduced. Although, she entered numerous exhibitions in Britain and offered her work for sale, it was done more as a matter of protocol, and she was probably quietly relieved that not many works appear to have sold.<sup>21</sup>

In spite of her many artistic commitments, Edith Collier maintained a close connection with her relations in Manchester. Although the English and New Zealand Collier cousins were all in relatively close contact during this period, Edith and Fannie remained the firmest friends. As single women in their mid-thirties, Edith and Fannie Collier often supported and were company for each other at family gatherings. Fannie wrote to Edith Collier of an impending wedding:

Vina is getting married in June--- I suppose you will attend that wedding! Come and support me then we needn't be fearful smells. I'm dreading the ordeal.  
Do write and tell me what you are doing--- it's quite time you came for a chat!<sup>22</sup>

Edith Collier often visited other relations while she stayed with Fannie.

I went to Aunt Marianne's and they were all well, they took us all to dinner and then to a pantomime which was deadly slow I wished they had taken us to a Beecham opera instead. Fannie and I sat there with broad grins on pretending we were enjoying it. We had some music.<sup>23</sup>

Although it may have seemed to Edith Collier and her brothers that war would go on forever, by the time the conflict in Europe entered its fifth year it was apparent to many in Britain that Germany's position was becoming progressively compromised. Edith Collier wrote to her parents in April 1917:

H[arry] and I were walking past the National Gallery when we met Charlotte Russell who had just arrived from Germany and wasn't she glad to get away, she looked half starved and so she was says [sic] all Germany is starving and has been for a long while snow and frost has spoilt everything. She says we don't know war is on here. In the cities of Germany they are far worse off than the villages, they have a

<sup>21</sup> It is unknown how many works Edith Collier sold in Britain, though many of the major works listed in exhibition catalogues such as the Society of Women Artists did come back to New Zealand.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Edith Collier, 22 March 1917. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>23</sup> Post-Script from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier and family, 1 January 1918. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

little bread. Soups made out of some powder mystery and a tiny bit of meat once a week and macaroni also once a week. The frost spoilt all the potatoes, so it is true enough that they are starving, it looks as if they can't hold out much longer.<sup>24</sup>

The German nation, with a civilian population and army clearly more stressed and beleaguered than its opposing forces, could not survive another winter. Forced to surrender to Britain and its allies in November 1918, Germany brought the First World War to an end:

Twenty-five minutes ago the guns went off, announcing peace. A siren hooted on the river. They are hooting still. A few people ran to look out of windows. The rooks wheeled round, and were for a moment, the symbolic look of creatures performing some ceremony, partly of thanks giving, partly of valediction over the grave.... Taxi cabs were crowded with whole families, grand mothers and babies, showing off; and yet there was no centre, no form for all this wandering emotion to take. The crowds had nowhere to go, nothing to do; they were in the state of children with too long a holiday.<sup>25</sup>

Just four days later:

Peace is rapidly dissolving into the light of common day. You can go to London without meeting more than two drunk soldiers; only an occasional crowd blocks the street.... We are once more a nation of individuals. Some people care for football; others for racing; others for dancing; others for - oh, well, they're all running about gaily, getting out of their uniforms and taking up their private affairs again.<sup>26</sup>

Unprecedented in its impact on European and British society, the end of 'The Great War' brought with it considerable social change. Unable to reconstruct the fabric of society in the manner in which it had existed before the war, Britain's systems of power and patriarchy were to find that the social norms, customs, and the institutions that had supported them were now fundamentally altered. While in some areas change was subtle and not immediately apparent, in other situations it was clear from the outset that society could never be the same again. The role of women in British society changed dramatically as a result of World War One. With men fighting in large numbers in Europe, women were forced in many cases to assume roles and work which had previously been the prerogative of men. Finding they could operate in these positions quite competently, women were reluctant to give up their new found roles, responsibilities, and freedoms.

As for artists, a critic for *The Studio* wrote an article which attempted to give some over-view of the impact of the end of the war on art in Britain:

At last the great conflict of nations has come to an end. Right has triumphed over Might, and with the passing of the dark thunder-clouds that for more than four years have oppressed humanity. Justice from her throne on high reveals her countenance to mankind. How wonderful, how miraculous indeed, has been the course of events during the past few months!

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24 Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 16 April 1917. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

25 V. Woolf, *The Dairy of Virginia Woolf: 1915-1919*, Vol. 1. London, 1977, p. 216.

26 *ibid.*, p. 217.

All things considered, art has not appeared to have suffered from the long-drawn-out war to anything like the extent anticipated at the outset. It has been a matter of surprise, indeed, that many other artists besides the portrait painters, who have for the most part flourished exceedingly during these troubled times, should have done as well as they have.

But what of the future? It is possible that during the transition from war conditions to a firmly established peace the economic situation may react on the artistic production of the country; but on the other hand it may turn out that one of the results of the war has been the elimination of a considerable number of practitioners who will in the future pursue other occupations for which they are better qualified.<sup>27</sup>

"But what of the future?" must have been a question asked by many artists looking to find a place and role in post-war Britain. It must have appeared to many that this was an appropriate time to decide whether to continue as practitioners, or to "pursue other occupations for which they were better qualified." In addition, expatriate painters like Edith Collier, Margaret Macpherson and Gladys Reynell faced the difficulty of deciding whether they should remain in Britain or return home. In Margaret Macpherson's and Gladys Reynell's case, the decision to travel back to Australia was quickly made and speedily put in place. Finding that her father was seriously ill, Gladys Reynell sailed for Adelaide in January 1919, planning to establish a pottery with Margaret Macpherson once there.

Margaret Macpherson's decision to return home, however, could not have seemed as astonishing to her friends as the decision she made at a similar time to marry a prosperous Australian businessman, William George Preston. Travelling home with William Preston on the R. M. S. Makura, Margaret Macpherson arrived in Sydney in August 1919, and was married in December of the same year. She missed the opening of an exhibition which she had planned with Gladys Reynell in Adelaide, settled in Sydney and began what she was to refer to as her "second life."<sup>28</sup> Gladys Reynell must have been deeply shocked to find that her friend had made alternative arrangements. Her husband was later to recall that he "broke up the twosome."<sup>29</sup> Margaret Macpherson informed Edith Collier of her decision to repatriate by sending a belated postcard from Vancouver which said:

Are you astonished?  
On my way to Australia via Canada  
Good luck,<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> "Studio Talk", *The Studio*, Vol. 75, 1919, pp. 86-9.

<sup>28</sup> R. Butler, *The Prints of Margaret Preston: A Catalogue Raisonné*. Canberra, 1987, p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Postcard from Margaret Macpherson to Edith Collier, 1 June 1919. Edith Collier Paper, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Edith Collier received news, also, of her friend Charlie Ayliff's hasty departure after the Armistice. Charlie Ayliff wrote from the R. M. S. Kenilworth Castle:

I'm so sorry I didn't come to say good-bye before I sailed.... It was rotten coming away alone - I just hated the feeling that nobody knew one or cared in the very least what happened to ye olde nurse - Such a rotten feeling after the send off I got at hospital!... I can't believe that I'm really going home - just think of it Collier old thing - it was quite a short time ago, that I did brass rubbings with you - Wasn't it a funny joke!  
We call at Madeira so this will be posted there so long - be good and write at least once every ten years -  
Lots of Love Charlie.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to the departure of her friends and colleagues, Edith Collier had to face the gradual return to New Zealand of her brothers, Reg and Harry, and her cousins Hal and Jim Stewart. After greatly enjoying their company, and dedicating so much of her personal time to their care and well-being, the departure of her male relations must have been keenly felt by Edith Collier. Edith Collier no doubt recognised in their return some foreboding of what must inevitably come for her.

Separated from her teacher of five years, from a number of her close friends, and from her male relations, Edith Collier was left with the option of either returning home herself, or of reconstructing her life in post-war Britain. She clearly wanted to stay as long as her family and circumstances would permit:

Miss H[untington] has a beautiful flat and a studio in Chelsea I don't know what she thinks of my den and the way I dress. I am never a fit object to go anywhere, the price of clothes is something awful. The way people are dressing since armistice is great....  
I am sorry the girls are so worried about me being here, it will be much better here later on.  
I did see the farewell to New Zealanders all overseas men, the N. Z. looked splendid they were really the best.<sup>32</sup>

Having survived the war, Edith Collier was determined to establish new contacts and seek new options for overseas training rather than return home. While the artist's brothers and cousins were arriving back prepared to repatriate and farm family holdings, Edith Collier was intent on exploring all artistic avenues available to her before she left Britain.

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Charlie Ayliff to Edith Collier, undated, 1919 [?] Edith Collier papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Charlie Ayliff, as part of her contribution to the war effort, worked in a hospital for wounded soldiers. She appears to have nursed Reg, Edith Collier's brother, after he broke his leg playing a 'friendly' game of Rugby with other soldiers on leave.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1918-1919 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.



## CHAPTER SIX

# Hodgkins and Collier: 1919-1920

Living in London immediately after the Armistice meant that Edith Collier faced conditions which would have challenged even the most committed person. Exorbitant food and fuel prices, along with strikes, social unrest, and a shortage of skilled and semi-skilled labour necessary to make basic services available, made residing in London an expensive and emotionally draining affair. The expatriate painter Frances Hodgkins also in London at this time, wrote to her mother in December 1918, and said:

....I have had no milk nor butter since coming to London... nor can I get my clothes washed no laundry will look at a new customer, so, dear, I have been very over worked & weary I can tell you washing, cooking, charring, painting teaching & going out to tea & dinner - too much altogether - I can't keep it up. In between the acts I get some painting done, but very little - you can't get any help at all - women ask £1 a week just to light yr. fire - the coal question is fierce. I have struggled along with a smoking stove and insufficient coal till I am desperate now I have decided to make a clean sweep of the stove & get a gas one instead & make my landlady go halves.... I was warned of the great difficulties of life in London & I took it on with my eyes open so don't complain. There is lots of good food in the shops for the rich, but the price of everything is staggering to my modest purse.... the crowds in the trains & buses are so great it takes nerve to face them. I have already had my handbag & ration book and purse stolen & I can tell you it is no joke losing yr. ration book these days....<sup>1</sup>

Harsher weather conditions in London, and no substantial improvement in the cost and overall availability of goods and services, meant the New Year brought little relief for much of the population. Hodgkins wrote again to her mother, in the new year, saying:

Snowed up & 9.30 p. m. the pipes frozen & I have just finished carrying water from the house thro' a sort of black lagoon of choking fog and sleet. I have now got into large gouty slippers & turned the gas on full & hang the expense.... You have to be as strong as a horse to stand this climate....<sup>2</sup>

Lacking the constitution that she felt would be required to survive in London, Frances Hodgkins was forced within a matter of a few months to leave the city and return to her former studio in St. Ives. "I am feeling pretty rotten... [she communicated in April 1919],

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Rachel Hodgkins, 30 December 1918. Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Rachel Hodgkins, 30 January 1919. Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, p. 339.

....& have left London having let my Studio for six months. I am a broken winded old bronchic having just struggled thro' a savage attack of flu - just - I would rather die than go through another 3 weeks like the last.... However I got away from London - & that is the great thing.... It has been an experience - a dear one - & has shown me I am not strong enough for it single handed - work has suffered. No doubt of it that more money is to be made in London if you can play the game & have the strength for it."<sup>3</sup>

While Frances Hodgkins managed to evade the rigours of life in London, Edith Collier continued to live and work in equally testing circumstances. Less open than Frances Hodgkins about the difficulties she faced in her correspondence home, Edith Collier feared immediate re-call if her descriptions were too graphic or disturbing. She wanted more of the opportunities that London offered and to play the art 'game' as long as possible:

I had a Miss Huntington and Dressfield [Dreschfeld] here to look at my work, it is really the first time I have had artists to look at my work, they studied at Paris and Germany. They seemed to be impressed liked my things, it is all right being people who know some thing about it to criticise. Miss Huntington knows many artists in London, she wants me to try and exhibit at the International in Bond Street in July told me how to go about it. I meant to have tried to exhibit at the New English but at the last I found that I also had to have two members to second me, so that put the cooker on, Miss H. would have been able to help me if she had known.<sup>4</sup>

Conscious as always of the lack of qualified or even suitable tutors available to comment on the work of women students, Edith Collier was pleased and perhaps relieved that she had met artists of a suitable calibre and standing, who would bring an impressive degree of international knowledge and experience to the roles of critic and teacher.

Edith Collier's attitude to tutors and art training, can be contrasted with that of her compatriot Raymond McIntyre, also in Britain in this period, who showed a man's confidence in his own innate ability:

As for the idea of going and studying under some well known man, my opinion regarding that also has decidedly changed since I left N. Z. Ones only chance is to be oneself. Who are eminent men, anyway? A man who looks big from N. Z. aint so very big in London. When you come up against a man, he doesn't seem so great as when you were a long way off him. Familiarity breeds contempt - perhaps not contempt in this case, but you know what I mean. I have had the experience of the teaching of these men - Nicholson - Lambert - Mies M. Lund - Townsley - Sickert - and know just about what can be got from teachers.<sup>5</sup>

Raymond McIntyre saw his presence in Britain as a right, not needing the justification of art training. He was free to be much more the individual and experimental artistic spirit, and did not exhibit the same sense of accountability for his decisions and direction as Edith Collier. As a man Raymond McIntyre was financially more independent, and his displays of non-

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Rachel Hodgkins, 12 April 1919. Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, p. 340.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1919-1920 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Raymond McIntyre to his father, 3 June 1910. Quoted in *Raymond McIntyre: A New Zealand Painter*. Auckland, 1984. p. 40.

conformist behaviour more socially acceptable. In addition to these considerations, Raymond McIntyre's letter also reflects a fundamental difference in attitude toward teachers that tended to exist between male and female students, and also a dramatic difference in the opportunities which seemed to come their way. While he felt confident enough about his position to doubt the value of teaching from well-known personalities who have subsequently been remembered as potent forces in the modern art movement in Britain, Edith Collier, by contrast, upheld the importance of two unknown exponents of modern art. Always seeking the guidance and teaching of those she believed might know more, Edith Collier, in her search for greater knowledge and more refined expertise stands in dramatic contrast to Raymond McIntyre whose final comment on the subject of teaching was: "Teaching suits those who have not seen the fallacy of it."<sup>6</sup>

For Raymond McIntyre, the Edwardian art scene in Britain was a scene dominated exclusively by lionised males whose careers had survived the death of a monarch and the dawn of a new century; for Edith Collier, however, art in Britain had a predominantly female face. She was compelled to pursue the only option readily available to her, and she found a rich source of advice and encouragement in the skill and expertise of women artists. Edith Collier's connection with Beatrice Huntington, in particular, proved to be a significant one and was maintained for a number of years. Edith Collier wrote to her parents in 1920 or 1921, and stated:

I expect you will think I am awful when I say I want to go for a month with Miss Huntington to Cornwall sketching.<sup>7</sup>

While Beatrice Huntington obviously occupied the role of critic in relation to Edith Collier's work, and later was probably her travelling and sketching companion, the English painter also took it upon herself to suggest the name of a male artist who might also criticise her friend and colleague's efforts with more authority. As she wrote to Edith Collier in October 1919:

The other object of this letter is - I have found you a critic if you still want one - He is a very good artist indeed. An excellent man all round, a very sound draughtsman - and an excellent painter. He came up and saw my work and I found him very helpful indeed - He is one of those rare painters, who can draw magnificently, of course don't be too hopeful, but as I say, he has helped me to an extraordinary extent: He charges a guinea - perhaps you have heard of him or seen his work. "Wilderman!" If you would like him to criticise your work let me know and I will ask him to write you and fix a date! You are so anxious to improve your drawing, that is why I kept you in mind - and having proved his excellence as a critic strongly advise you to get him up. You will find him very friendly and kind, not a bit awe inspiring. He is a Lancashire man - studied in London and in Paris the later under Castellucho.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>       ibid.

<sup>7</sup>       Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1919-1920 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>8</sup>       Letter from Beatrice Huntington to Edith Collier, 23 October 1919. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Whether Edith Collier took advantage of Beatrice Huntington's "Wilderman" connection is unclear; but it evidently did not establish itself as an on-going pupil / teacher relationship.

Consolidating what she had already learnt, Edith Collier continued to produce prolific quantities of work, now generated almost exclusively outside the framework of formal art education. Gradually seeing herself more in terms of the independent and possibly professional artist, Edith Collier exhibited a growing sense of certainty and self-confidence in her attitude to her work. To her parents she wrote in the closing months of 1919, or possibly early 1920, "I feel I have learnt a lot working on my own."<sup>9</sup> Armed with a ticket of admission to the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington which allowed her to read and study for a year from 23 December 1919, and her own very considerable selection of art books and journals collected during her stay in Britain, Edith Collier extended the boundaries of her knowledge about art.

In her effort to make the most of her post-war years in London to study and produce work, Edith Collier both attended and participated in a number of exhibitions. In 1919 she went to see two significant shows of modern European art at the Mansard and Leister Galleries, along with the Royal Academy exhibition, the National Portrait Society Exhibition, The International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers Exhibition, and the Allied Artists' Association show. It seems 1919 was a turning point for Edith Collier. She carefully considered her options; either return home with the knowledge she had already acquired, or challenge her ideas about art with renewed commitment and vigour. The considerable number of exhibition catalogues from this year amongst her possessions is testimony to the fact that she chose the latter option. Margaret Macpherson's knowledge of the British art scene had taught Edith Collier which exhibition events were worth attending and which were not. Edith Collier wrote to her parents from Bonmahon as early as 1915 and said:

Thanks for that slip about Gibson, he seems to have had good teachers he has gone in for crafts - that London exhibition he exhibited at is only were [sic] you pay for the space and anyone can exhibit, if it had been the London Group of Modern Artists it would have been something to be proud of that sounds nasty but it is the truth.<sup>10</sup>

Seeing modernist exhibiting groups and venues as desirable yet, from her position as an expatriate woman artist, very difficult to attain, in 1917 and 1918 Edith Collier organised her

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<sup>9</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1919-1920 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, 11 May [1915 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

most significant exhibitions through the Society of Women Artists (S. W. A.). Refused by the Royal Academy on a number of occasions (over a period of three or four years from 1915 to 1919), and daunted in 1919 by the prospect of finding two members to back her entry to the New English Art Club, Edith Collier was next to consider both The International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers (I. S. S. P. G.), and the all-female exhibiting group, the Women's International Art Club (W. I. A. C.). For the 1920<sup>11</sup> show of the I. S. S. P. G., she had an oil entitled *The Nude* (287) and a pastel of *An Old Irish Man* (444) hung. Though she was successful in gaining entry to this exhibition, she does not appear in the catalogue of the 1921 I. S. S. P. G. show.

Frustrated by the obvious lack of exhibiting opportunities for women in Britain at the turn of the century, a group of women artists had banded together to form what was originally known as the Paris Art Club. In 1900 the Art Club held its first exhibition and the event from that point on became an annual fixture on the London artistic calendar. Initially called the Paris Art Club "because many British women artists at the end of the nineteenth century sent their work for exhibition to the Paris Salon, which had a more open policy of accepting Women's work",<sup>12</sup> the name gradually lost its original significance and was ultimately changed to the more expansive title of the Women's International Art Club. Suggesting an international flavour, the W. I. A. C. offered no less than its new name implied. It exhibited the work of many women of varying backgrounds and nationalities, and the W. I. A. C. became an important testing ground for those women who either hoped to launch an artistic career in London, or who as expatriate painters wished to assess where their talents and overseas training placed them in relation to other female practitioners. It is likely that Edith Collier's inclusion in the 1920 W. I. A. C. exhibition would have given her greater cause for satisfaction. Having been advised by both her mentor Margaret Macpherson and Beatrice Huntington to become a member of the more prestigious W. I. A. C., Edith Collier was persuaded to submit examples of her work and was duly invited to join the group.

In 1920 W. I. A. C. exhibition, Edith Collier entered *Study of a Nude* priced at £15.0.0, and *Fragments*, a pastel, and *An Old Irish Man* at the more conservative price of £5.0.0 each. Frances Hodgkins, who had exhibited eight works in the 1919 W. I. A. C., was also represented alongside Edith Collier in the 1920 show. Choosing to submit just two works for this exhibition, the better known New Zealand painter priced *My Landlady* at the

<sup>11</sup> The catalogue for this show which Edith Collier brought back to New Zealand is printed with the date 1919, however the exhibition is listed as the 26th annual exhibition, while the another catalogue date 1919 is listed as the 25th annual exhibition, and the 27th annual exhibition catalogue is dated 1921. Logic suggests that the 26th annual exhibition was held in 1920 and not 1919.

<sup>12</sup> T. Grimes, J. Collins, O Baddeley eds., *Five Women Painters*. Oxford, 1989, p. 12.

comparatively high price of £18.18.0, and listed *The Edwardians* in the catalogue without a price. Although critical response to Frances Hodgkins' previous 1919 W. I. A. C. contribution had been positive, inspiring Frank Rutter of the *Sunday Times* to describe her as "one of the most richly gifted and personal painters of either sex we have today",<sup>13</sup> criticism of the collective event was frequently sexist in its approach and negative in its over-all conclusions. In 1913, the year that Edith Collier arrived in Britain, *The Studio* had described the fourteenth annual show as containing only "some attractive exhibits." The critic stated:

Many women, as seems natural, attack the problem of flower painting and still-life, and yet, judging by this exhibition, it is not in this vein that feminine talent expresses itself with the vitality with which some of the best of their masculine contemporaries have revived this branch of painting.<sup>14</sup>

In 1919 the critic conceded that a change in venue had improved the lighting of the show, but felt further improvements could be made:

The Society's exhibitions usually comprise a small section of the craft work, and we should like to see this department extended even if it involved a curtailment of the pictorial portion.<sup>15</sup>

Reducing her efforts considerably from the 1919 to the 1920 show, Frances Hodgkins' decision to contract her contribution may well have been motivated by the adverse critical reaction to the show as a whole. Exhibition representation was an important consideration for any aspiring artist in Britain at that time, but exposure at an event with little professional prestige might ultimately prove a dubious advantage.

Although it is possible that Edith Collier and Frances Hodgkins met before the 1920 W. I. A. C. exhibition, it is a fact that they assumed a student / teacher relationship after this time. The circumstances under which they met are unclear, but it seems likely that their mutual involvement in the W. I. A. C. brought them together and allowed Edith Collier the opportunity to make arrangements regarding Frances Hodgkins' summer school at St. Ives.<sup>16</sup> Hoping to re-establish her Cornwall summer classes on a scale similar to those of her continental groups in pre-war times, Frances Hodgkins would no doubt have been delighted to add an eager and talented expatriate New Zealander to her growing list of female students.

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, p. 340.

<sup>14</sup> "Studio Talk", *Studio*, Vol. 58, 1913, p. 218.

<sup>15</sup> "Studio Talk", *Studio*, Vol. 76, 1919, p. 60.

<sup>16</sup> Frances Hodgkins was forced by the out break of World War One to disband her substantial painting classes and flee France in 1914. After a brief stay in London she decided to make a safer and more permanent home for herself in the artists' colony at St. Ives. She wrote of her relocation: "I think I shall go down to St. Ives in Cornwall where I can live cheap and quiet for the winter, & come the worst it is a prudent spot to be in well out of the way of Zeppelins etc...." (Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, p. 298) At St. Ives Frances Hodgkins resumed her painting classes. Of these she wrote: "I have a big party round me & I am teaching both morning & afternoon....They are rather a dull lot of human beings, & I think to myself that any Art Master wld. be good enough for them & curse secretly at having to lay out so much strength & energy in such unpromising material.... I have to put up with the duffers & be as patient as I can. I have great contempt for the pampered well fed English woman whose physical welfare is her only thought..." Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, pp. 317-18.

The fishing village of St. Ives offered not only a rich history of artistic colonisation, but also a great variety of suitable subject-matter and motifs. Establishing its reputation in the nineteenth century as a community and rugged coastal location worthy of note, St. Ives attracted both established artists and the amateur,<sup>17</sup> all equally intent on capturing some aspect of the area's physical grandeur, or the picturesque qualities of its settlement and inhabitants. Katherine Mansfield described the area's clear light and magnificent coast line:

This place out in the sun today was a miracle of beauty... the sea and the coast line remind me curiously of New Zealand, and my old servant is like an old woman down the Pelorus Sounds.<sup>18</sup>

Laying claim to such names as Laura and Harold Knight and the Stephen sisters, Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf, the artistic colony at St. Ives possessed a notable pedigree and an impressive exhibition record with main stream venues such as the Royal Academy and New English Art Club.

As Edith Collier prepared to travel to St. Ives in July or August 1920, she would have remembered the cautionary words of Bessie Gibson, who wrote to her in August 1913 from a village in North France, with the advice:

As regards sketching in Cornwall I know it is good but I think too good for the place is crowded out and you can't get rooms for love or money. That is only what I am told so go but make sure about your digs first.<sup>19</sup>

Her "digs", probably almost as hard to get in 1920 as they would have been before the war, are likely to have been in rooms rented or shared with other female students. Working closely with members of the Hodgkins class, Edith Collier found the majority of her subject matter amongst the inhabitants, the fishing boats and wharves, and the streets of St. Ives. In a letter that referred to Edith Collier's stay at St. Ives, an unknown correspondent asked:

How goes the painting? I am imagining you and Miss Cabdell hard at work on heads of fisher people and children, and do so wish I were doing them too.  
Miss Hodgkins' picture has arrived, to the great astonishment and amusement of my brother! My Mother thinks anyway my sketching lessons won't have done me any harm! I wonder how your people will take your pictures on your return to N. Z.?!<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A number of New Zealand women artists visited or worked at St. Ives and Penzance, including Margaret Stoddart (1865-1934) and Mina Arndt (1885-1926). For further information see Marion Whybrow's book *St. Ives 1883-1993: Portrait of an Art Colony*. Suffolk, The Antique Collectors Club, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> E. H. McCormick, *The Expatriate: A Study of Frances Hodgkins*. Wellington 1954, p. 251.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from Bessie Gibson to Edith Collier, 10 August 1913. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Bessie Gibson is an Australian artist who worked as a student of Frances Hodgkins' at St. Ives.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from an unknown correspondent to Edith Collier, 21 October 1921. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

This writer obviously understood the fact that Frances Hodgkins' and her students' work was modern and might be misunderstood or even considered threatening in conservative circles.

While on the one hand Edith Collier must have been aware of possible prejudice against her modern work at home, on the other hand her sense of adventure and commitment to exploring the boundaries of modern art seem to have won out. Frances Hodgkins wrote of Edith Collier's progress and potential in October 1920:

I have one very bright N. Zealander, from Wanganui, Collier by name - who is coming on wonderfully - I'll make something of her I feel sure....<sup>21</sup>

Although Edith Collier would most certainly have wanted to produce work which pleased her friends and family, she does not appear to have let this consideration affect the nature or degree of her experimentation while in St. Ives. Her work in the artists' colony and surrounding rural area for a period of two to three months resulted in a considerable body of oil, watercolour, and gouache paintings, and pencil and charcoal sketches. She arrived at St. Ives having already worked and experimented with modern ideas and approaches, and used this past experience as the basis for new developments and exploration in her work. Her time as a student of Margaret Macpherson's and her exposure, especially in 1919, to the work of Matisse and other contemporary French painters established the pre-conditions for a considerable leap forward in her development as a modern artist. The encouragement, teaching and ideas of Frances Hodgkins was the catalyst, freeing up Edith Collier's approach to painting and allowing a broader and more spontaneous response to subject matter. If, as is likely, the drawing *Portrait of a Woman* (see cat. no. 362) and the oil painting *The Spanish Woman* (see cat. no. 357) "are among the first compositions attempted after Edith Collier began work under Frances Hodgkins in St. Ives",<sup>22</sup> then after this "initial adjustment to her teacher's view point",<sup>23</sup> Edith Collier's work seems to take on a direction and integrity of its own.

Living and working with Frances Hodgkins in an atmosphere of artistic tolerance and high expectation, Edith Collier seems to have flourished, producing work which was progressively more experimental. Fluid and free in their execution, paintings such as "*The Kitchen Table* (see cat. no. 379) and *Man With Red Cheeks* (see cat. no. 370)... [and] watercolour-drawings... [such as] *Roof and Chimney Pots* (see cat. no. 384)... seem to anticipate Frances Hodgkins'

<sup>21</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Rachel Hodgkins, 1 October 1920. Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, pp. 348-9.

<sup>22</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*



own stylistic development in the watercolours done on her journey through France in 1921."<sup>24</sup> Believing in Edith Collier's obvious talent and prospects, it seems that Frances Hodgkins spent a considerable amount of time trying to realise some of her potential. Assuming the role and status of both mentor and matriarch, there is little doubt that Frances Hodgkins was instrumental in initiating a shift in her student's ideas and approach to art, resulting ultimately in Edith Collier's most cohesive and consistently experimental body of work. At St. Ives some of Edith Collier's paintings of the town became increasingly abstract. Watercolours like the loosely brushed *On the Quay, St. Ives* (see cat. no. 389) are daringly experimental in their flattening of picture space and almost abstract form. Equally, *An Alley in Old St. Ives* (see cat. no. 392) and *An Alley to the Harbour, St. Ives* (see cat. no. 390) offer the viewer a ruthlessly compressed picture space, with compositional elements which are rigorously simplified and distributed across the picture plane with uniform intensity. While the subjects of Edith Collier's St. Ives paintings are never completely lost sight of, in some of her more progressive watercolours the subject emerges only slowly from an apparently arbitrary and decorative distribution of colour and form.

Frances Hodgkins and Edith Collier shared similar aims and ideas about their work and this is apparent in the parallels that can be made between their paintings and drawings. Edith Collier's St. Ives works, both stylistically and in terms of subject matter, bear a very close resemblance to images by Frances Hodgkins like *Bridge over a River* (c. 1920) and *Cornish Village* (c. 1920). *Bridge over a River* can be linked to Edith Collier's *Arched Columns in Landscape* (see cat. no. 421), and similarities exist between *Cornish Village*, and Edith Collier's *On the Quay St. Ives*. Student and teacher were working towards similarly progressive goals, therefore it is not surprising that Edith Collier and Frances Hodgkins may have considered travelling to the South of France together. This would have ensured an income for Frances Hodgkins and allowed Edith Collier the opportunity to extend her studies with her new tutor a little longer. A letter to her mother written on 1 October 1920, outlined the circumstances surrounding her last few weeks in St. Ives:

....I hope to be in the South of France by the end of the month, with luck - and am extremely busy winding up & making ready. My class is now reduced to 3, all of whom will follow me South - useful to grease the wheels, but rather in the way - I am longing for a large new region all to myself....<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* Gordon Brown's observation seems well founded when Frances Hodgkins' work in France is compared to that of Edith Collier's St. Ives watercolour-drawings and drawings. Links can be made between Frances Hodgkins' *Mother and Child* (c. 1921) and Edith Collier's *Pouting Girl* (see cat. no. 368), and between Frances Hodgkins' *Les Martigues* (c. 1921) and *The Cinema* (c. 1922), and Edith Collier's *The Little Housewife of St. Ives* (see cat. no. 375), *A Cornish Boy* (see cat. no. 371).

<sup>25</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Rachel Hodgkins, 1 October 1920. Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, p. 348.

Whether she was potentially "in the way" or not, it seems Edith Collier may well have had her heart set on following Frances Hodgkins abroad. An unidentified correspondent [possibly Beatrice Huntington] wrote to Edith Collier and said:

I wonder if your destination - New Zealand or the South of France - has been settled yet! I do hope it has and in the way you wish. What a time of suspense it must have been for you. Have the Australians gone back yet? They promised to write to me, and come to supper with me in London.... If they are by any chance in St. Ives do tell them I am expecting them! Have you come across M. Smet, a Belgian artist, who has been, and perhaps still is, living in St. Ives. He had a one man show during October at the Burlington Gallery in Leinster Square - It was chiefly still life though there were one or two portraits and one or two interiors. His pictures were a blaze of colour and I thoroughly enjoyed them. If you come across him in St. Ives and have an opportunity of seeing his work do take it. Miss Hodgkins must know him. I wonder what she thinks of it.<sup>26</sup>

The proposed trip to Southern France, obviously a matter for some anxiety on Edith Collier's part, does not appear to have been settled in the way the artist might have wished. Judging from the evidence of surviving biographical material and the titles and subject matter of her work, it appears that Edith Collier did not make this trip abroad. The above letter suggests that Edith Collier requested the backing of her parents to accompany Frances Hodgkins to France, which they denied, forcing her to remain in Britain until her departure for New Zealand in December 1921. Frances Hodgkins and Edith Collier were both, equally, on the brink of adopting a more rigorously modernist and progressive approach to their work. Frances Hodgkins was able to consolidate and build on these developments during her travels through France, Edith Collier was not. Lacking the relative independence that Frances Hodgkins now enjoyed from the sale of her work and tutoring fees, Edith Collier's movements were largely paid for and therefore ultimately dictated by her parents. Unable to see herself as any more than a student of other "big guns", Edith Collier was unable to bridge the gap between someone who perpetually pays out for art training and someone who might provide it. Although she was trained to teach art to children and younger students, Edith Collier never used this training to free herself from her dependence on family finances. Her hesitation to teach, though, may in part have been the result of her likely failure to gain a full pass in the examinations she sat for her teaching certificate.

Exactly when Edith Collier returned to London is unclear, but it seems there would have been little to keep her in St. Ives after Frances Hodgkins' departure towards the end of October 1920. In a letter sent to Edith Collier by a friend and colleague [possibly Australian artist Vida Lahy], the writer stated:

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<sup>26</sup> Letter from an unknown correspondent to Edith Collier, undated, 1921 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

I thought of you all dozens of times I wondered if Miss Hodgkins turned up at all after you had turned everything upside down to suit.  
Your poor studio a cuckoo's nest with us all. Altho' owing to some mix up we were not due at Hindhead till Tuesday, I really would not have gained much from staying longer at St. Ives.<sup>27</sup>

Whether this letter refers to a visit Frances Hodgkins might have made to Edith Collier's Leinster Square rooms on her way to France, or possibly a visit to the studio she temporarily occupied at St. Ives, is hard to say, but certainly it not only suggests an informal connection between student and tutor, but it also gives some indication of the high regard Edith Collier had for her expatriate teacher. Busily "turning everything upside down" in her studio to gain the good opinion of her tutor, Edith Collier and her efforts to impress did not go unnoticed, or, in terms of affectionate concern, unrewarded. In a letter dated 18 February [1921], Frances Hodgkins, aware that Edith Collier's time in Britain was coming quickly to an end, gave advice and encouragement for her colleague's future work and studies in New Zealand:

Very many thanks for the postal order for £5 - safely come. It was good of you to send it so quickly - I do hope you are not running yourself short. You had better wait till you get out to N. Z. before sending balance (£9.1.5) Better send draft to me c/o my Bank N S Wales 29 Threadneedle St EC. This will be quite all right. I am glad you are going to stay on a little longer. I am certain your fate will bring you back to England, as mine did. It will help your work a lot getting away from it, thinking over it from a distance and sorting out values and generally consolidating what you have absorbed. It was a tragedy your pictures missing fire like that & lying all this time at the P. O. This may explain your Father's attitude. It was too disappointing. But don't mind the buffets or knocks. They are inseparable from the artists life. Its an uphill tug all the way & its only the stout hearted who win through. I am glad you are working hard - we came here a fortnight ago - very cold weather - no fires - cold floors & an icy wind. But its milder now & the dear sun warming us through. A young American from Paris is having lessons - very keen. By the end of the month there will be 2 more pupils & then we move on towards Spain. I am doing Mothers & Babes as a corrective to Cassis mountains. If I show in London before you leave I'll let you know. I hope to show at [the] International & will send you tickets if I do. I wish you could invest in Roger Fry's "Vision & Design" (25/- alas) to take back with you to N. Z. I am told its good. It will give you something to think over. Best of luck & courage  
Yours very sincerely  
Frances Hodgkins<sup>28</sup>

Frances Hodgkins choses to look positively at her compatriot's trip home, remembering her Aunt's comments about the difficulties she faced at this time, Patricia Lonsdale writes of Edith Collier's position then:

Henry was rather careless about the regularity of his payments to Edith in Britain so it would have been a pretty tough existence over there, especially after her brothers returned to N. Z. after the war. When the time came that she was recalled it could have come as somewhat [sic] of a relief.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Vida Lahey to Edith Collier, undated, 1920-1921 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Edith Collier, 18 February [1921] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. The money referred to in this letter may well be payment for *Belgian Mother and Child* (1919), a work of Frances Hodgkins' that was purchased by Edith Collier before she returned to New Zealand. On Edith Collier's death in 1964, *Belgian Mother and Child* was bequeathed to Bethea and Dorothy Collier, and later placed on loan at the Sarjeant Gallery as part of the Edith Marion Collier Loan Collection.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

Constantly short of money and almost entirely dependent on her father's good will for the most basic of necessities, Edith Collier may well by now have been finding life abroad both difficult, and at times even soul destroying. Refused the opportunity to travel to the continent and constantly reminded by the family of her privileged position in being allowed to remain abroad, Edith Collier succumbed, it seems, almost voluntarily to the increasing weight of obligation and pressure to repatriate as soon as possible. Certainly, Patricia Lonsdale recalls:

By the end of 1921 the family in N. Z. were demanding that Edith return home.  
 "Enough has been spent on her, what is she doing over there?" a sister [of Edith's] said to her father.<sup>30</sup>

Edith Collier set about the task of writing to her friends and colleagues to inform them of her impending departure, she received responses which were tinged with sadness and concern for her future. In September 1921, Beatrice Huntington wrote from Scotland:

I am sorry you are really returning to New Zealand. I will miss you very much indeed especially when I get back to London. But perhaps you may not go after all. I got my studio let just at the moment, for 3 months. If you really return to N. Z. and your studio falls vacant. Would it be possible for me to take it on? May I ask what the rent is. Mine is so expensive and it is going up still more. So I fear I can't afford to keep it on. Perhaps you would let me know... and if you are really going - and if yours is less than mine - it would be a great consideration - It would also be less lonely.... Dreschfeld has at last got another studio in Paris and intends living there. If you return to N. Z. via Paris let her know at once. She will be glad if you will and will help you.... Do write to me regularly and tell me what you are doing, for your work interests me very much and I am so eager you should make a name for yourself because you are so sincere and so persevering ----- Now are you drawing hard? and have you succeeded in uniting the drawing outlook with the painting outlook? If you keep on as you are doing you ought to hold your own splendidly and don't get discouraged you have everything, that makes a fine artist and one thing worth no end, Your work is always big - it is never small.  
 Keep me posted because I really care if you get on - and we might all show together later.... Hoping you aren't really going. Very Warmly Yours - and with love and good luck.<sup>31</sup>

Like Frances Hodgkins, Beatrice Huntington seemed to see Edith Collier's continued presence in Britain as being inextricably linked with her on-going chances of success. She is obviously aware that Edith Collier's permanent repatriation would place her friend and colleague out of her own reach, and beyond that of the British art scene for ever.

Knowing that she had just a few months left in Britain, Edith Collier, still determined to learn as much about art as she could, enrolled herself in print-making and modelling courses at the London Central School of Arts and Crafts. Although she took these courses, she did not see her self as being guided by any one tutor or mentor in particular. In 1921 she wrote to her parents:

<sup>30</sup> Patricia Lonsdale, "Edith Collier in Retrospect", unpublished essay, 1986.

<sup>31</sup> Letter from Beatrice Huntington to Edith Collier, September 1921. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Since Miss Macpherson left - 2 years ago I haven't taken lessons on drawing or painting, but worked on my own - to learn from a big gun or painter I mean.<sup>32</sup>

She attended classes from February to June 1921 and produced a variety of wood-block prints and sculptural pieces. Casts were made of her sculpture but these were not brought back to New Zealand because of their weight.<sup>33</sup> In the course of packing up and preparing to make the long sea journey home, Edith Collier corresponded with a number of friends about a planned stop-over in France before finally leaving Europe and returning to New Zealand. Gaining the addresses of two or three suitable boarding establishments in Paris, Edith Collier set about making arrangements for her brief trip to the continent. While one friend recommended "a boarding house... [on the Rue de la grande Chaumière, where] you all sit at a long table - male and female like a dining party",<sup>34</sup> another promised to reserve a room for Edith Collier during her stay in Paris. Already living in the city and working as an artist herself, Miss Dreschfeld wrote to Edith Collier in the autumn:

If you like I can take a room for you when you say which day you arrive. Do come and see me here. I have another studio now where I live, and find it ever so much better so. I am very fed up with my work at the moment but still hope for the future! You say in your letter you leave London on the 8th Nov I suppose that is 8th of December? Anyway let me know if you would like me to take a room for you. I know a cheap place for lunch and dinner a sort of students hostel where the food is quite good but they have no rooms available unfortunately. It is the Foyer des Etudiantes Boulevard Saint Michel. Many English and American students go there and you can get quite a good meal for from 3 to 4 francs or even less.

Shall hope to see you but do for goodness sake let me know beforehand as when people come I am invariably out.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, Edith Collier continued, amongst her other commitments, to complete the awesome task of preparing her paintings, prints and sketches for shipment home. Buying a length of "good rope", she packaged and secured her work and belongings in varying sized crates and boxes, custom-built for her by a local London packing case and timber merchant. Long lists itemising the contents of each separate case, still amongst her papers when she died, are testimony to the amount of time and effort required to complete the job. Although some sketches and paintings had been sent back previously in containers such as piano cases, by far the largest proportion of her work still remained in Britain. Daunting though the shift must have seemed, Edith Collier worked with energy and commitment, having the ultimate satisfaction of packing no fewer than four hundred art books and journals amongst her property and leaving remarkably little of her creative output behind. Her preparations to leave

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32 Letter from Edith Collier to Eliza and Henry Collier, undated, 1921 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

33 The casts have not been located.

34 Letter from unknown correspondent to Edith Collier, 21 October 1920. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

35 Letter from Miss Dreschfeld to Edith Collier, undated, October or November 1921. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

must have taken up much of her time as the only art show she appears to have attended throughout the year was the 1921 International Society of Sculptors and Gravers Exhibition.

Leaving England in December 1921, Edith Collier travelled to Paris where it is highly likely that the much anticipated meeting with Miss Dreschfeld did occur. Although little specific information relating to the trip exists today, two sketches of a female nude by Miss Dreschfeld and signed "Dreschfeld Paris 1921" were included amongst Edith Collier's belongings. In addition to this, it is also possible to speculate that the artists may have worked together briefly, sharing a model or a life drawing class and possibly exchanging a work at the end as a memento of their time together. Whatever Edith Collier may or may not have been able to do or see during her time in Paris, there is little doubting the fact that her time there was very short, and that within a matter of a few days after her arrival she was booked with Thomas Cook and Son to board the 20.35 train departing Paris for Marseilles on 15 December 1921. From Marseilles Edith Collier caught the R. M. S. 'Malwa', and was at sea by Christmas Day, joining in the ship-board festivities by attending a special luncheon in the second class saloon. After nine years of resisting her parent's desire for her to return, Edith Collier was finally heading home to New Zealand.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Wanganui: 1920-1922

In January 1922 Edith Collier was united with her family for the first time in nearly a decade. "It must have been an historic meeting!" Fannie wrote from Manchester in March 1922, "and what changes there would be. I hear you found two nieces to welcome you."<sup>1</sup> And Fannie's mother Frances also corresponded with a compassionate awareness:

I am sure you must feel very strange after living so long in noisy London to settle down at home; Ivy [?] was in London in May and she insisted on my coming down for a few days. They all thought it would do me good, so I went in the end, we so often spoke of you, and we went up to Whiteleys one day just to see the district, and although we had not time to go to Leinster Sq Ivy [?] showed me where it was, and a store, (I forgot the name of it) were [sic] you used to go for meals, often she said; I was very interested in it all.... I was sorry to hear of your Gr Mothers illness, these things are very sad I hope yr Mother and Father are well, please give them my love.... Were your Parents very pleased with yr work and did it all arrive safely?<sup>2</sup>

Separated from her life in Britain, and separated from all that had become familiar, Edith Collier, after the initial excitement of home-coming, was left at the age of thirty-seven with the task of reconstructing a new life for herself in New Zealand. Where art had been the focus of her daily energy and concern, now her own ambitions and interests must jostle for a place amongst the multitude of other issues affecting farming and family life. Returned to her place as eldest daughter in a family of nine, Edith Collier would never again know the freedoms she enjoyed in Britain. She would never again be free to organise her time in the way she had done while she was away, and would never be able to approach her art with the dedication that had come naturally to her when separated from the routine pressures and distractions of family life. In a letter to Miss Urquhart, a friend and colleague who travelled with her on the boat coming out to New Zealand, Edith Collier expressed a sense of real despair:

No! there is no studio, & no farm grants in site [sic] yet, but I still live in hope.... England feels a long way from N. Z. would you like to go back without the sea trip eh? I know I would even if we had another 'Reefer' near us. Were your cousins on the "Wiltshire". One of my brothers gave

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Edith Collier, March 1922. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Frances Collier to Edith Collier, 27 June 1922. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

me a nephew not long ago that is about the only exciting thing that has happened ---- have you any news?<sup>3</sup>

If Edith Collier felt confined and frustrated by the lack of opportunities available to her now she lived and worked within the context of her family, the opportunities offered both locally and in terms of the wider New Zealand art scene compounded this sense of claustrophobia and disappointment. Without the sharing of ideas about art, deprived of the companionship and commitment to painting and sketching that other female students had given her, Edith Collier's creative world, and her energies and enthusiasm to be productive within that world, were very much curtailed. With her support networks gone, there was little incentive to produce new work or to continue with the rather radical innovations she had been experimenting with in Britain. Meeting similar obstacles on her return to Grahamstown, South Africa, Charlie Ayliff wrote to Edith Collier in c. 1922:

You absolute rotter - why haven't you written to me? I've been thinking a lot about you lately wondering how you were getting on - as luck would have it I found the enclosed in an old *Studio* - I don't know if it is your Home address but I'll chance it -

The moment you get this you will just sit down and write to me. I must know everything - how you got away from England with that small girl - what you are painting now - have you had a show yet - and oh just everything.... I've got a studio and have started work in real earnest in fact I'm on the verge of having a show I don't want to have it as I really haven't anything worth showing but Mother promised the padre's wife that I would lend my work - the proceeds are going to some W. C. T. U. or something!

At first it was awful trying to start work again - I just couldn't get going - nobody I came across understood the 1st thing about art - I was miserable - almost decided to take on a husband instead of art! Then about two months ago I discovered (or was discovered by) the Artistic Circle in Grahamstown - none of them do much work other than desultory sketching but a lot of them understand decent work when they see it and one or two have quite modern ideas, so I can discuss things with them - I'm quite thrilled just now - a Miss Roberts has come here for a few months to work and to have a show - she had three years in Germany before the war and then went over to America for two years so you can imagine that she has some style. Her work is ripping - very modern of course - she doesn't do figures. I'm glad as otherwise she might criticise my poor attempts too much -

She showed in the best shows in America and had a private one of her own before coming here - she settled in Cape Town had a private exhibition to which no one came, when she sent her work to the Cape Town Shows it was rejected - work that had hung on the line in New York and Boston! They told her mother that they were sorry but it was most necessary that the standard should be kept up!! that will show you what art out here is - nobody begins to know anything about it....<sup>4</sup>

Obviously relieved and encouraged to meet a group of like minded 'modern' artists in a colonial centre such as Grahamstown, Charlie Ayliff sees the viability of continuing to work and consider her life as an artist as being inextricably linked with the support and opinion of

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Miss Urquhart, 4 December [1922 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Charlie Ayliff to Edith Collier, undated, 1922 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Although I have found no other references to Edith Collier bringing back a "small girl" from Britain, it is possible that she brought a young child back to New Zealand in 1922. Both Eliza and Edith Collier were concerned about philanthropic issues, and they may well have viewed emigration to New Zealand as a new start for a child whose life had been dislocated by World War One. I have asked family members about the idea of Edith Collier returning with a young girl, and no one can remember talk of their aunt chaperoning a child, and they are certain no such person stayed on with the family after the artist's return.



others. As long as her work has the approval of a small select group of people, Charlie Ayliff considers herself as being socially sanctioned to occupy the role of artist and to consider herself a creative entity within her community. Without the reprieve that this perceived permission offers, she is forced to consider the only other socially acceptable vocation open to a woman of her age and social background; that of marriage. After a delay of some days or weeks, Charlie Ayliff returned to the letter she had begun earlier, and closed it with a description of the public response to her first exhibition:

My exhibition is over I'm thankful to say - most of Grahamstown thought that my work was terrible, I've done a lot of very decorative water colour landscapes which they couldn't understand - Anyhow they got worked up and interested to the extent of having a column and a half in the newspaper describing and criticising my show!! I sold one still life group and a wood block print, so didn't exactly make my fortune - people are so stodgy I was surprised at selling as much as that ---  
Do you ever hear from Miss Mac or de Grey?.... I say you absolutely must write to me toute de suite -  
Love to your brothers and lots to yourself. Yours Charlie Ayliff<sup>5</sup>

Edith Collier was confronted by the same degree of local prejudice and ignorance about art as Charlie Ayliff, when she started tentatively to involve herself in art events in Wanganui and beyond. The New Zealand art scene that Edith Collier returned to in 1922 had none of the heterogeneous flexibility that Britain had offered artists before, during, and even after World War One. Frances Hodgkins commented on the conservative nature of art in New Zealand in a letter to her mother written in April 1921:

The reason I don't send out more work to N. Z. is that it has become a bit too modern & I find it very difficult to return to my earlier & more easily selling style....<sup>6</sup>

Willie Hodgkins, concerned at the prospect of his sister Frances returning to live and work in New Zealand, wrote to their mother in 1922:

I don't know what to think about her [Frances Hodgkins] coming out and starting here.... I think some times she might do all right and again it seems rather a risk unless she is prepared to submit to colonial ways and conditions.<sup>7</sup>

Too modern in her ideas and, like many expatriate artists, producing work which was decidedly out of step with the work that was being heralded as fine art in New Zealand, Frances Hodgkins made the wise decision to postpone her return home indefinitely.

While expatriate artists who had the power to sever personal connections with New Zealand often chose to remain abroad, such as Frances Hodgkins and Raymond McIntyre, those who

<sup>5</sup> Letter from Charlie Ayliff to Edith Collier, undated, 1922 [?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Rachel Hodgkins, 14 April 1921. Quoted in L. Gill, *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, p. 353.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in E. H. McCormick, *The Expatriate: A Study of Frances Hodgkins*. Wellington, 1954, p. 204.

were compelled for various reasons to return found an artistic environment both suspicious and at times openly antagonistic to innovations occurring in Europe. While Sydney Thompson, "in the early 1920s... was easily New Zealand's most celebrated painter.... and became a model for the Professional artist who had achieved expatriate success",<sup>8</sup> more modern returning painters like Mina Arnt and Edith Collier received a less sympathetic response. Although modern elements were already present in New Zealand in the work of Rhona Haszard and Rata Lovell Smith, by 1924 the critic for the *New Zealand Herald* could still safely report that in the annual exhibition of the Auckland Society of Arts, there were "no daring departures from the conventional. Cubism, Vorticism, Futurism, and all the other freakish "isms"... find no representative."<sup>9</sup> Far from heralding a spirit of experimentation and adventure in the arts, critics and the New Zealand public alike sought out and acclaimed the conventional and the familiar. Pioneering perhaps in life style and social customs, an inherent sense of inferiority and compelling desire to clone conservative elements of the mother culture dictated the direction of creative expression in the Dominion, resulting in the fact that no "ism" could have any authority in New Zealand unless it had been thoroughly tested and accepted by the main stream art market at "Home" (see chapter two). Imitating what they believed to be acceptable in Britain, New Zealand artists in general offered little more than superficial renditions of a watered down, academic impressionism. Commenting on the absence of experimentation in New Zealand art, a visitor from Britain, W. H. Allen A. R. C. A., observed in June 1929:

The most notable thing about the Art of New Zealand is the absence of that pioneering spirit which is so evident in much of the work and play of this Dominion. In certain branches of agriculture, infant welfare and at Rugby football, New Zealand may be said to lead the world, but while we can hardly expect this country immediately to take the lead in matters artistic, it is surprising that artists here should appear to be so indifferent to modern movements in art.<sup>10</sup>

In New Zealand, the independent and autonomous spirit which might have allowed for experimentation in the arts was curbed. Commenting on the obsessive nature of New Zealand's relationship with Britain in a confidential report to the British Cabinet, L. S. Amery stated, after having made a tour of the Commonwealth:

If Imperial sentiment is strong in Australia, in New Zealand it is a passion, almost a religion. Alone of the Dominions, New Zealand is much more interested in her Imperial, than her national status.<sup>11</sup>

Half a world away from Europe, isolated, and to a large degree locked in a time-warp of ideas about art only marginally altered from the early days of pioneering and immigrant settlement, New Zealand represented a potential market for much that was dry and stuffy in British art.

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<sup>8</sup> Julie King, *Sydney Lough Thompson: At Home and Abroad*. Christchurch, 1990, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in G. Brown, *New Zealand Painting: 1920-1940*. Wellington, 1975, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> W. H. Allen, "Impressions of New Zealand". *Art in New Zealand*, Vol. 1, No. 4, June 1929, p. 215.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in G. Brown, *New Zealand Painting: 1920-1940*. Wellington, 1975, p. 6.

Provincial centres like Wanganui clung even more avidly to the forms of British Academicism. Wanganui's infatuation with British academicism had much to do with the way the Sarjeant Gallery was funded, and the role that its benefactor believed art should occupy in society. In 1912 the city's ageing patriarch, Henry Sarjeant, died leaving a bequest<sup>12</sup> that provided funds for the establishment of a Fine Arts Gallery in Wanganui, and the purchase of works for its collection. Henry Sarjeant's will laid down conditions and recommendations that were to be influential in the Gallery's development. According to the conditions of his bequest, works were to be purchased for "their intrinsic value as works of high art only and not because they are specimens of local or colonial art, so that the said gallery shall be furnished with Works of the Highest Art in all its branches as a means of inspiration for ourselves and those who come after us."<sup>13</sup> Henry Sarjeant's will stressed the particular importance of art as a tool with which to raise the level of culture amongst the general public, and purchases were made with this strictly in mind. Realistic drawing, romantic colour, and significant subjects with an instructive message were considered to encapsulate Henry Sarjeant's wishes. By loading art with the social responsibility of educating and improving the average citizen, Henry Sarjeant's will inevitably placed heavy strictures on subject matter and stylistic approach. While the Sarjeant Gallery remained legally committed to Victorian notions of art, in Britain, by the turn of the century, the moral stranglehold imposed on art had already been challenged. Whistler's exercises in asceticism, followed by Roger Fry's two Post-Impressionist exhibitions, severely undermined any assumed connection between art and morality. As long as the Sarjeant Gallery and Wanganui's cultural elite held on to nineteenth-century notions about the role of art in society, there could be no easy acceptance of modernist ideas of the overriding importance of pure aesthetics, and no movement forward from that point.

In the opening decades of the twentieth century art criticism and commentary in Wanganui was academic in its focus and priorities, and lacked any sympathy with, or intimate understanding of modernism. The critical vocabulary which had dealt admirably well with the pictorial standards and conventions of academic realism failed completely in the face of work by British modernists such as Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell, and Duncan Grant. The modernist critical vocabulary which Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Frank Rutter had largely forged in Britain through their reviews and writing was completely lacking in Wanganui. The

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<sup>12</sup> "An Art Gallery had been discussed by the directors of the Library in 1902, but was considered to be impracticable. Ten years later when Mr Henry Sarjeant died he bequeathed property to the value of £30,000 in trust to the Borough Council for the purpose of establishing and maintaining an Art Gallery in Wanganui. On 20th September 1917, the foundation stone was laid by His Excellency the Rt Hon. the Earl of Liverpool, and on 8th September 1919 the Prime Minister, the Rt Hon. W. F. Massey, officially opened the building. This building... cost £20,000...." L. J. B. Chapple and H. C. Veitch, *"Wanganui"*. Hawera, 1939, p. 187.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Sarjeant's Will, Wanganui District Council Archives, Wanganui.

process of aestheticization of critics, commentators, and ultimately the viewing public alike, which happened as a natural process of the dissemination of ideas in Britain and Europe, did not occur in Wanganui. Modernist ideas and conventions arrived in New Zealand in confusing instalments which were not necessarily chronological, always out of context, and often arrived with little explanation of the theory or thinking behind them. The innovations that finally filtered through to provincial Wanganui were often removed still further from their sources. Without a vocabulary to discuss modernist work, or a background with which to understand it, the critics and public of the town were left dumbfounded.

The artistic elite in Wanganui were well versed in the history and conventions of academic painting, and this knowledge had become for them a signifier of class difference and cultural sophistication in the community. The upper middle class, from which this group was largely formed, were professional people, wealthy farmers, and landowners. This small privileged circle was hermetic, inward-looking, and intensely conservative. In larger urban populations this class usually fostered within its margins a liberal-minded educated sub-group who were informed, innovative, and experimental, and from which much of society's social and cultural change initiated. In Wanganui this sub-group was all but non-existent. Far from containing the seeds of artistic experimentation, the town's artistic elite fiercely policed the conventions of academic realism, becoming openly hostile to anything that was considered a change. By the early 1920s, artistically informed people already had a vague knowledge of the innovations that had changed the face of art in Britain and Europe, and these developments were universally regarded with fear, suspicion, and even disgust. Not only did modernism challenge the foundations of elitist art knowledge and practice on which so much of their social snobbery was based, but it also appeared to be dismissive of main stream social values, and therefore backward looking and potentially degenerate.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to the introduction of modernism in Britain a decade earlier, there was no detectable change in public taste or cultivation of a new generation of enthusiasts for modern art.

Art circles in Wanganui regarded modernism as a foreign aesthetic from distant Europe, and therefore were far from welcoming, or wishing to assimilate it into the local community. If art must take any new initiatives in the Dominion, then many thought it should be in the direction of an indigenous school and style. Critics were beginning, in Wanganui, to see New Zealand as a nation apart from Britain, at least in terms of location and history, and were identifying progressive art as that which would encapsulate both the New Zealand landscape and ethos. A critic who wrote for *Wanganui Chronicle* in 1926, stated:

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<sup>14</sup> There are numerous critical references to the backwardness of modern art in the *Wanganui Chronicle* in 1926. (See Appendices)

... if there is ever to be a National School of New Zealand the younger generation of artists must seek for inspiration from what they see around them and learn to express what they feel in their own manner, and not through the medium of the fashionable cult of the moment.<sup>15</sup>

The special qualities of New Zealand's unique landscape and light were believed to be more important factors in determining style and directions for the future than artistic influences from abroad. In 1926 the same Wanganui critic commented on the work of Nugent Welch, and wrote:

No. 122, "The Breeze," is Mr Nugent Welch's only contribution in oils. It is full of sun light, and is remarkably faithful in the rendering of the clear and bright atmosphere of New Zealand. Compare this with the colouring of No. 119 [*Butcher's Shop Marazion, Cornwall*], and you will get a very fair impression of the atmosphere of this country and that of the Old.<sup>16</sup>

Although in the 1920s British academic painting remained Wanganui's bench-mark of artistic achievement, there was a second acceptable option for a New Zealand artist to pursue and that was the defining of a domestic art and an indigenous style.

In addition to the entrenched ideas about art that prevailed in Wanganui, when Edith Collier returned in 1922, she entered a community whose political and cultural foundations had only recently been dramatically shaken by a scandal of huge magnitude in the town. Wanganui and its institutions of authority and respectability had received a severe blow on 15 May 1920 when the incumbent Mayor, Charles Evan Mackay,<sup>17</sup> was arrested for the attempted murder of a young soldier-poet, Walter D'Arcy Cresswell.<sup>18</sup> As events unfolded it was alleged that the Mayor had shot Cresswell with the intention of silencing his threats to expose Mackay's homosexuality. The public revelation of Charles Mackay's homosexuality and near fatal wounding of D'Arcy Cresswell was a mortifying embarrassment to the community as a whole, and to the Mayor's wife and family. Although every effort was made by a number of Charles Mackay's legal colleagues to play-down the event and reduce press attention, there was still a

<sup>15</sup> "Art Exhibition: Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society: Preliminary Review of the Pictures". *Wanganui Chronicle*, 17 September 1926, p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> "Among the Pictures: At Sarjeant Gallery: Wanganui Arts and Crafts Exhibition: Third Notice (Continued)". *Wanganui Chronicle*, 1 October 1926, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> C. E. Mackay was born in Nelson in 1875, and was educated at Wellington and Canterbury Colleges graduating with a B. A. at the age of 19, and gaining his L. L. B. in 1900. After being made a barrister and solicitor of the Supreme Court of New Zealand, he moved to Wanganui in 1902 and was elected to the Borough Council in 1905. He was elected Mayor in May 1906 and held office until February 1912. In May 1915 he was re-elected to the position of Mayor which he held until his resignation in 22 May 1920.

<sup>18</sup> Walter D'Arcy Cresswell was born into a well established Canterbury family in 1896. He was educated at Christ's College and then travelled to London where he briefly attended an Architectural College. His studies in Architecture were prematurely terminated by World War One. He enlisted in 1914 and was wounded in one of the early actions on the Somme. After nine months in hospital he was discharged as unfit for further service. Cresswell regarded his true vocation as that of poet and writer. When he arrived in Wanganui just days before the incident with Mackay, Cresswell was touring the North Island to continue his convalescence and complete his historical romance :manuscript.

great deal of gossip and disruption generated by his resignation from office and subsequent trial.

"Great Public interest was evinced in the proceedings" of Charles Mackay's trial, and "the portion of the Courtroom reserved for the public [was]... crowded immediately the doors were opened."<sup>19</sup> A written statement by D'Arcy Cresswell was read out at the trial and was signed by Charles Mackay with the comment that "the statement as it related to his action was substantially true."<sup>20</sup> The evidence given in court established that Charles Mackay and D'Arcy Cresswell had an illicit meeting after hours at the Sarjeant Art Gallery, to which the Mayor gained entrance with his private key. Afterwards the two men returned to Charles Mackay's office where he showed the young writer "several pictures of nude women", and, as Cresswell described it, "a certain disgusting feature of [his]... character." D'Arcy Cresswell admitted that he "led him on on purpose to make sure of his dirty intentions, and [had]... told him... that he must resign the Mayoralty at once."<sup>21</sup> Fear and anxiety played on Charles Mackay's mind to the extent that the next day he made an attempt on D'Arcy Cresswell's life, seeking to avoid suspicion by making the shooting look like suicide. Charles Mackay's version of events collapsed during questioning at the Police Station resulting in his trial and sentencing on 29 May 1920, to 15 years jail.

Charles Mackay had been Mayor of Wanganui from 1906 to 1912, and was re-elected for a second time in 1915. Mayor Mackay was an active supporter of the arts in Wanganui. He was a well educated man who, in his role as Mayor, had been closely associated during his second term with the building of the Sarjeant Art Gallery, and it had been his drive and vision that had ensured its completion by 1919, in spite of many difficulties. He had also put time and energy into the purchase of works for the Sarjeant Gallery's permanent collection, and was personally involved in organising one of its first major exhibitions. In fact, only months before his resignation in May 1920, Charles Mackay had been negotiating the shipment of a group of paintings by the Boston Guild of Artists to be exhibited at the Sarjeant Gallery in

<sup>19</sup> "Shooting Sensation: Charge of Attempted Murder. C. E. Mackay Pleads Guilty. Committed to Supreme Court for Sentencing." *Wanganui Chronicle*, 28 May 1920, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* Mayor Mackay was probably brought to his demise by a political faction in Wanganui that opposed his office. Only weeks prior to the incident with D'Arcy Cresswell, he had been involved in very troubled arrangements with the R. S. A. over the visit of H. R. H. the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII. As a result of the controversy, "[he] had been carrying a pistol for the last four or five weeks because he was under the impression his life was threatened." (*Wanganui Chronicle*, 29 May 1920, p. 5) D'Arcy Cresswell, a homosexual himself, was introduced to Charles Mackay by an unidentified cousin of Cresswell's, who was obviously someone of standing in the Wanganui community. It seems almost certain now that Cresswell's cousin planned the Mayor's downfall without anticipating the complications that ultimately arose. Charles Mackay guessed D'Arcy Cresswell's complicity in a much more complex and political plot, but was helpless to expose the true protagonists. For more information about H. R. H. the Prince of Wales' visit, see Athol Kirk's article, "Visit a Royal Shambles", *History Now*, 1994, pp. 62-63.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

September 1920. The proposed exhibition generated a flurry of correspondence between Boston and Wanganui when the event was suddenly abandoned because of scandal surrounding the Mayor. The Wanganui Borough Council's decision to cancel the show, however, had to be revoked when they were informed "that the cases [of paintings were] already loaded on the steamer and it [was] impossible to remove them."<sup>22</sup> To prevent further complications and embarrassment, the Council Minutes of 3 October 1920 record "that... Council [should] hold an exhibition on arrival of the pictures making a charge of 1/- for admission to the Gallery...."<sup>23</sup>

D'Arcy Cresswell, like Charles Mackay, was a similarly cultured individual with a brief but established reputation as a writer, poet, and art critic. D'Arcy Cresswell's involvement with literary circles in London between c. 1914 and 1919 had already resulted in the publication by Pearson's of a short story entitled "The Ends of the Earth", "and for some time past," it was reported in the *Wanganui Chronicle*, "he [had] been engaged on a historical romance, which [was] to be published by John Murray the well-known English publisher."<sup>24</sup> The trial of Charles Mackay and revelations about the publicly exonerated, but certainly bohemian, D'Arcy Cresswell brought a cloud of suspicion down on the 'progressive' cultural elite of Wanganui. The conduct of the Mayor and his possession of "five photographs of nude women",<sup>25</sup> invited a trenchant and certainly very critical re-assessment by conservative circles of the artistic and cultured way of life. The Mackay-Cresswell fiasco created a retrenchment of traditional ideas and conservative values, creating an artistic environment in Wanganui that was inherently suspicious and unsympathetic towards newness and innovation. Homosexuality, pornographic female nudes, and art became irrevocably linked in people's minds. It was generally understood that art had been given too much licence in the town, and that licence had ended in degeneracy and disgrace.

While Charles Mackay's programme of acquiring works for the Sarjeant Gallery's permanent collection was thwarted soon after its instigation, purchases made by Henry Sarjeant's widow, Ellen, were not. Henry Sarjeant's bequest had given Ellen Neame a strong hand in the running and strategic planning of the Gallery. "It is my desire," he stated in his will, "that my wife shall during her life time be consulted on all matters relating to the establishment

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<sup>22</sup> Letter from Guild of Boston Artists to Wanganui Borough Council, 9 July 1920. Wanganui District Council Archives, Wanganui.

<sup>23</sup> Wanganui Borough Council Minutes, 3 October 1920. Wanganui District Council Archives, Wanganui.

<sup>24</sup> "The Shooting Sensation. Accused Before the Court". *Wanganui Chronicle*, 18 May 1920, p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> "Shooting Sensation. Charge of Attempted Murder. C. E. Mackay Pleads Guilty. Committed to Supreme Court for Sentencing." *Wanganui Chronicle*, 25 May 1920, p. 5.

management and carrying on of the said Fine Arts Gallery."<sup>26</sup> As a result of this request, Ellen Neame and her second husband J. Armstrong Neame had considerable power over the Gallery and the acquisitions made for its permanent collection. Soon after Henry Sarjeant's death in 1912, the Neames travelled abroad in search of art to send back to Wanganui. Purchases were made with funds set aside that for purpose by Henry Sarjeant. The finances of the bequest were at times insufficient to cover the cost of the items they wished to acquire, and the couple were forced to appeal to the Wanganui Borough Council for additional money. On receipt of a request for funds, a letter from the Town Clerk to J. Armstrong Neame, written on 4 May 1920, explained their new policy. He wrote:

Wanganui in common with the whole Dominion, is passing through a time of greatest financial stress, and the prospects for the immediate future do not look bright. Great difficulty is being experienced in obtaining money to carry out works authorised, and for ordinary requirements. The new Council, comprising seven sitting members and five new ones with Mr T. B. Williams as Mayor, were elected last week, and the policy to be adopted must be one of extreme economy.<sup>27</sup>

Although the Neames failed in this bid to gain extra funds, they were successful in a number of other attempts.

The Neames' taste and their ideas about art dominated overseas purchases made by the Sarjeant Gallery for over two decades.<sup>28</sup> The couple set about the task of acquiring works for the Gallery with all the freshness and naiveté of enthusiastic amateurs. Their purchases were predominantly British, though there was a reluctant effort on the Neames' part to collect more broadly. This was an effort which brought them some heartache in 1922 when they were encouraged to spend £215:19:8 on a work entitled *The Gleaners*, and attributed to Jean Francois Millet. This painting was later exposed as an almost certain forgery. In July 1925, Ellen Neame outlined the on-going difficulties of making suitable purchases. "We will not be in a hurry to buy unless we see something we feel very sure will please the Public who have given their shillings as well as ourselves," she reassured the Wanganui Town Clerk. "There is a very good Royal Academy Ex[hibition] this year, many good pictures but of course as you know anyone with a "name" gets much more than the sum you have sent. So we must look amongst the less known artists or get something abroad."<sup>29</sup>

Due to the buying programme of the Neames and the very conservative nature of works gifted, by 1922 the Sarjeant Gallery's permanent collection was largely British art of very

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<sup>26</sup> Henry Sarjeant's Will. Sarjeant Gallery Archives, Wanganui.

<sup>27</sup> Letter from Town Clerk to J. Armstrong Neame, 4 May 1920. Sarjeant Gallery Archives, Wanganui.

<sup>28</sup> Ellen A. Neame died in London on 25 September 1939. Her involvement with the Sarjeant Gallery had reduced considerably since her last visit to Wanganui in 1934.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Ellen A. Neame to Mr Murch, 7 July 1925. Sarjeant Gallery Archives, Wanganui.



average merit punctuated by the occasional French, Italian, or Flemish work, of equally average merit, and the even more occasional established name. Philip Wilson Steer and Rosa Bonheur were the most significant international artists legitimately represented in the collection, and C. F. Goldie, with his *Of the Making Many Books there is No End*, which was a gift of the Art Society, was the most important New Zealand name. The development of the Gallery's permanent collection had been far from strategic or thought through, reflecting very clearly the whims, conservatism, and underlying prejudices of those that had assembled it. Acquisitions for the collection began in 1901 and over a period of 21 years only three works by New Zealand artists were added, all of which were gifted to the Gallery rather than purchased. The themes of the collection equally reflected the interests and pre-occupations of those making the selection. Religious art was strongly represented, along with genre scenes, country idols, British landscape, and still life. The Gallery's permanent collection was further supplemented by works loaned by private residents in Wanganui. After the Gallery building was completed in 1919, the Sarjeant became an ideal and safe storage place for valuable items of art and craft while its wealthy patrons were overseas, and the Council received numerous letters offering works on loan. Ellen Neame was one of a number of people who displayed their private possessions at the Gallery. In the Borough Council Minutes of 8 March 1923, she was recorded as "stating that she [had] some interesting and beautiful antique furniture, which she would be willing to exhibit in the Sarjeant Gallery during her absence in Europe."<sup>30</sup>

While the Sarjeant Gallery seemed set at this time to become moribund with weak acquisitions and conservative loans, art education in Wanganui was progressing steadily. Although the Technical School had grown from very modest beginnings, by 1915 it was located in new buildings on Ingestre Street and had a role of one hundred and ninety-four students. The Technical School's vigorous promotion of its courses increased the roll still further before the school's temporary closure at the end of World War One. "During the influenza epidemic in 1918 the school was used as an emergency hospital and for a time the classrooms were equipped as wards...."<sup>31</sup> Classes were resumed as soon as the epidemic was over, and in 1922 control of the school was handed over from the Wanganui Education Board to a separate Board of Managers. Though the Technical School appeared to be flourishing, there were few exhibiting opportunities and avenues of support and involvement once a student had finished training. The Wanganui Society of Arts and Crafts,<sup>32</sup> which had started active operations in the art rooms of the Wanganui Technical School in October 1901, was, by the early 1920s, still recovering from an extended period of abeyance. There are no Arts

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<sup>30</sup> Wanganui Borough Council Minutes, 8 March 1923. Wanganui District Council Archives.

<sup>31</sup> L. J. B. Chapple and H. C. Veitch, *"Wanganui"*. Hawera, 1939, p. 159.

<sup>32</sup> The group was first named the Wanganui Society of Arts and Crafts, but this was later changed to the Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society.

and Crafts Society minutes recorded between 1911 and 1923, which suggests that the group had lost both momentum and membership. The prolonged cessation of meetings may in part be explained by the dislocations and disruption of war, however, there is no explanation for it stopping initially other than the focus of art interest in Wanganui shifting to Henry Sarjeant's 1912 bequest, and to the proposed new gallery.

When Edith Collier returned to Wanganui in the early 1920s, then, she came back to an artistic environment that was already potentially hostile to the innovations contained in her work. The art she admired was regarded as a short-lived cult which was degenerate and foreign, and which reflected the decay of social standards, as much or more than the break down of artistic ones. The development of a New Zealand school of painting was considered the most appropriate avenue for future domestic art to explore. The community was now intensely homophobic and conservative, if not reactionary, with no effective liberal-minded group to support or encourage experimentation. Tastes in art, music, and culture generally, were viewed as an index of social class and those that appeared not to conform to established norms and assumptions in these areas found themselves ostracised and looked down upon. In Wanganui's claustrophobic artistic environment, Edith Collier's chances of succeeding were almost nil. Her decision to remain living with her family in Wanganui, well away from the main centres of innovative art production in New Zealand, is certainly a confounding one. Why did she stay in a community which was insular in its ideas and isolated in its location? The art scene in Wanganui offered none of the support and exchange of ideas that Christchurch, say, and Wellington offered. Christchurch particularly assumed a significant role as a cultural centre around the time of Edith Collier's return to New Zealand. As Gordon Brown points out:

After the Great War, Christchurch emerged as the leading city so far as the visual arts were concerned.... In the 1920s, the future of New Zealand painting depended a good deal on what a handful of Christchurch painters would do with their paints, brushes and canvas.<sup>33</sup>

There is no doubt that Edith Collier's decision to remain in Wanganui meant she missed out on the collective momentum that an advanced group of artists could have offered, and because she was cut off from the main centres of innovation and innovative thinking about art, she gradually lost the courage of her convictions to challenge convention, and ultimately to carry on painting.

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33 G. Brown, *New Zealand Painting: 1900-1920*. Wellington, 1972, p. 49.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# A Career in New Zealand: 1922-1964

A little over a year after her return to New Zealand, Edith Collier received a letter from a friend in Britain. Mrs Littlejohns wrote in April 1923:

I recently became a member of the Women's International Art Club. I turned up there on varnishing day expecting to see some of your great masterpieces and was very much disappointed to find that you had not sent.

The secretary told me that the society had heard nothing of you since you went away. I do hope you won't desert, particularly just now when I have become a member.

I am wondering whether any communications which have been sent to you have gone astray. I notice that in the catalogue they have your address all wrong, or else I've got it all wrong. Anyway I'm sending this to what I believe the address to be, so I hope you get it.

When are you coming back? and are you painting great things?...

I'm still trying to paint and still sending bad paintings out to exhibitions. I have got a cheek hav'nt [sic] I? Write me sometime, please. When you can.

Sincerely yours,

I. Littlejohns<sup>1</sup>

Far from considering the prospect of returning to Britain, by the time Edith Collier received her friend's letter she was already very much involved in the ongoing concerns of caring for her immediate and extended family. Taking on almost sole responsibility for nursing her elderly grandmother, Emma Mary Parkes, Edith Collier had virtually no chance of escaping these obligations to pursue her career as a full-time painter. Fannie wrote to her friend from Manchester and said, "I wonder whether your grandmother is still alive - I suppose not. That was a big job you struck."<sup>2</sup> And later, with a note of exhaustion and despair, Edith Collier herself wrote to a fellow student in Britain, "My grandmother is so very ill, it seems as if she can't live another day."<sup>3</sup> After Emma Parkes' death in December 1922, Edith Collier nursed her father Henry who died in 1935, her Aunt Annie Stewart who died in 1944, and her mother Eliza who died in 1946. Increasingly, the task of caring for sick and infirm family members became her personal responsibility. As Patricia Lonsdale remembers:

<sup>1</sup> Letter from I. Littlejohn to Edith Collier, 10 April 1923. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Edith Collier, 15 May 1924. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Miss Urquhart, 4 December [1924 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

She devoted more and more time to the care of her family; she nursed her tyrannical father through a long illness at the end of his life with patience and love. Two families each had ten children; Edith looked after the mother and each of the nieces and nephews as they were born; she became nurse, cook and house-keeper, always on call.<sup>4</sup>

As her sisters' and brother's families grew in number, the Collier and Stewart families turned to Edith for assistance, becoming increasingly dependent on her personal commitment of time and energy to secure their survival and well-being.<sup>5</sup> Nursing expectant mothers, supervising and caring for children, and looking after the baby once it was born, were all tasks which took Edith Collier away from her home at Ringley and interrupted her painting for considerable periods of time. On such visits to her farming relations, cooking, cleaning and child-care took precedence over painting or sketching. One of the artist's nieces states, "I well remember Mum anxiously telling Edith to leave the soup she loved to make for us and go off and paint!"<sup>6</sup> While Edith Collier's domestic contributions were greatly appreciated by each family in turn, Patricia Lonsdale remembers that her Aunt "would [also] be expected to get out and paint something, that is why there were some rather indifferent oils of landscapes of the various farms. I don't doubt she did half the housework before she set off with her paints!!"<sup>7</sup> Fitting her painting around a host of domestic chores and requirements, Edith Collier had few opportunities to apply concerted effort or thought to any of her painterly projects or studies. Often, when she did leave the farmhouse for a day painting, she would be accompanied by a group of young nieces and nephews eager to test their own skills and learn more about art. Patricia Lonsdale recalls:

She was an important part of our family. Between the wars and during the depression years we lived on a farm. Edith would visit frequently and stay. She always brought her paints and canvasses and took my brother and me sketching. We were encouraged to paint with her on pieces of timber, cardboard or anything flat and plain. Neither my brother nor I had any talent but somehow what we produced made a picture because she would reach across occasionally with a stroke here and there and our child-like daubs fell into some sort of perspective.<sup>8</sup>

Although Edith Collier's time was very much taken up with domestic commitments, there were many occasions when she was able to escape her responsibilities for a while and paint. Nearly a quarter of Edith Collier's oeuvre, in fact, was produced after her return home (see

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Lonsdale, "Edith Collier in Retrospect", unpublished essay, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Collier and Vera Stewart (nee Collier), Edith's brother and sister, both had families of ten children. Edith and her sisters, Dorothy and Bethea, helped their sister Vera a great deal with her family. Their assistance included having Barbara Stewart, one of Vera's children, to live with them for the first eight years of her life, and also caring for other members of the Stewart family on extended stays at Ringley. According to family sources, Edith was the primary care-giver.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Judith Donald to author, 5 April 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Lonsdale, "Edith Collier in Retrospect", unpublished essay, 1986.

cat. nos 438-564 and 567-574), her largest subject group being tree studies and New Zealand landscape, but there are also thirty-three figure and portrait studies, twenty-four of which involve family members. Almost all the work that she produced in New Zealand after her return was executed between 1922 and 1942. Edith Collier could paint in the privacy of her studio at Ringley (which consisted of a three room cottage located on land at the back of the family homestead), or in deserted farmland while staying with her brothers and sisters:

I did a painting of the mountain from Tangiwai I was out there on my own. Jack was cutting pipes so I had the plains to myself.<sup>9</sup>

Edith selected view-points, scenes, and portrait subjects from her many visits to family farms around Wanganui, Waverley, Marton, Sanson, Palmerston North, Eltham and Taihape. The majority of her locations and sitters were both familiar and convenient, which reflects a continuation of her earlier pattern in New Zealand of recording and responding to people and places close at hand. Apart from the obvious issues of expediency and availability, Edith Collier's mature New Zealand subject choices reflect a growing commitment to satisfying her own personal priorities and interests rather than public or formal ones. She enjoyed and valued her family, especially the infancy of her nieces and nephews, and was captivated by the rugged, tree covered hill country of the Taihape, Manawatu and Wanganui districts, which she recorded often descriptively and representationally in her work.

Though there are a number of significant exceptions, in general, the portrait studies that Edith produced most immediately after her return home reflect a closer interest in formal issues. *Harry Collier* (1922-1923: see cat. no. 438) and *Anita Kathleen Stewart* (1926: see cat. no. 455), two early portraits, make an interesting comparison with the later *Sidney Raymond Collier* (1942: see cat. no. 562) and *Margaret Rosemary* (1939: see cat. no. 554). Harry, Edith's brother, and Anita, a niece, both offer an immediate and very direct revelation of subject. The composition and cropping of these paintings is unconventional, achieving an effect which would have been decidedly modern in New Zealand. Harry's face, and the top of his shoulders, dominate the canvas, and the same is true of baby Anita, whose seated, full-figure is placed close to the front of the canvas, and runs almost its entire length. Aunt Dorothy, on whom Anita sits, is cropped with the same expediency as the curtain opposite, forming what looks almost like two book ends around the figure. Pictorial space is flattened in both works, and largely unmodulated colour is placed against colour to define form. Both images are pared down and simplified, and brush marks are explicit.

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<sup>9</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Dorothy Collier, 22 January [1922-1925 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

*Sidney Raymond Collier*, again a brother of Edith's, and *Margaret Rosemary*, one of her youngest nieces, present a more conventional approach. Though they are capable paintings, especially *Margaret Rosemary*, the composition and cropping of these images is less immediate and confrontational. Pictorial space is less flattened, and the neutral backdrops to the figures are a less integral and assertive part of the canvas' over-all design. Both groups of paintings were produced with a family audience in mind, but they do not share the same formal interests. An exception, however, can be made of the oil painting *Charlie, the Shepherd* (1930-1940: cat. no. 486), which, though painted later in Edith's productive years in New Zealand, still reflects some of her earlier formal achievements. Like Harry, the head-and-shoulders-figure of Charlie dominates the canvas, and paint is applied in a gestural, expressive manner. There is a sense of flattened pictorial space, but the literal and sombre tonality, and, again, almost neutral background are evocative of a traditional approach. The painting's main achievement is not its application of modern formal conventions, but its acute exploration of character and psychology, reminiscent of the best of Edith's British work.

Over time, Edith's landscape painting reflects a similar shift away from formal preoccupations, but, again, there are significant exceptions among her later work. Her early Kawhia landscapes of 1927-28 exhibit her continued interest in simplifying landscape: the view-points she chooses are high, allowing the scenes of harbour and Pa to dominate the canvas. Her three paintings of Maketu Pa entitled *Maketu Pa, Kawhia* and *Kawhia Harbour and Pa* (c. 1927: see cat. nos. 462-464) are located on the shores of Kawhia Harbour, and represent a particularly successful rendering of Maori village life in the landscape. Lacking the self-conscious exoticism of works by Christopher Perkins, such as his similarly composed lithograph *Ohinemutu* (c. 1933), Edith's Pa is an integral part of the painting's overall design. The colour and shape of the Pa buildings echo that of the hills behind, establishing an almost organic connection between Pa structures and the landscape. In *Maketu Pa*, Maori and their washing (which hangs on a line) are represented by blotches of strong colour, which enhances the visual interest of the foreground, while focusing attention on the painting's human activity. These works are devoid of sentiment and detail, but formal concerns are even more implicit in another oil entitled *Kawhia Harbour* (c. 1927: see cat. no. 465), which again takes the harbour as its subject, though this time the focus is on European buildings. Simplification is rigorously applied in this work. The small fishing huts nestled amongst trees on the shore of the harbour are reduced to simple planes of colour, and blotches of yellow and red washing hang on a line. Calligraphic strokes represent the work's few details: a window, a chimney, the eaves of a roof. Reflections on the harbour and low clouds which obscure the distant landscape are simplified in their modulations and gestural in the application of their paint. This is one of the more modern paintings Edith produced in New Zealand.

After her time at Kawhia, Edith Collier's application of formal criteria for pictorial construction and execution became less rigorous and consistent. Conventional pastoral scenes of grazing sheep became a frequent theme of her work. Oils such as *A Pastoral Scene in Marton District*, *Sheep Sheltering Under Trees*, [*Landscape with Sheep*], [*Grazing Sheep*] and [*Landscape Marton*] (1930-1940: see cat. nos. 503-507) are more conventional in composition, more intense in their attention to detail, and more evocative of light, atmosphere and sentiment. These pastoral landscapes, executed on the many Collier farms, were family favourites for which Edith gained much praise and encouragement. Her numerous paintings and studies of stands of gigantic tree trunks were also well received by family members, who were as keen to own them as they were to admire. Some of her most outstanding examples, [*View Through Giant Trunks*], [*Landscape Framed By Trees*] (1930: see cat. nos. 475-6), and the grouping *Forest Sentinels*, [*Giant Tree Trunks*], and *Study of White Pines* (c. 1930-40: see cat. nos. 498-500) are reminiscent of Emily Carr. Oil paintings by Carr, such as *Tree* (1931) and *Western Forest* (c. 1931), focus, like Collier's work, on giant tree trunks of monumental proportion. In both Collier's and Carr's paintings, large tree trunks dominate the canvas, and an absent sky-line gives the image a brooding immediacy. Carr's paintings, however, explore abstract shapes and decorative colour, where Collier's studies remain literal and representational. Collier painted her images to please herself and her family, and though some of these pictures were exhibited, their intended audience was most often private.

Late paintings such as [*The Gardens at Ringley*], [*Trees and Hill Country*] and *Farm Buildings*, *Field's Track* (c. 1940: see cat. nos. 559, 561, and 563), offer examples of a renewed engagement with formal issues just a very short time before the artist ceased painting. [*The Gardens at Ringley*] displays a patch-like use of colour not unlike that of Matisse, while the forms of [*Trees and Hill Country*] and *Farm Buildings*, *Field's Track* are dramatically simplified; *Farm Buildings*, *Field's Track*, a particularly competent painting, shows a Post-Impressionist outlining of form. Because Edith Collier had learned modern conventions and techniques, these were always available for her to use even at the end of her artistic career, though the reasons for her applying them were now purely personal.

While she was free to paint what and how she liked while she was alone, at the end of a day painting Edith Collier had to face the pressure and criticism of her family's response to her work. Family resources had paid for her time abroad, and she was now not independent of those resources, so she felt it inevitable that family members would voice an opinion on her work. Family members did stand back in judgement, approving or disapproving of the work she produced. They were opinionated about the arts, and had distinct notions about what

Edith Collier should paint and the manner in which she should paint it. Parochial in their ideas and ignorant of the innovations to which Edith Collier had been exposed in Britain, the family on the whole would give little support to anything which challenged or extended the boundaries of conventional art.

Edith Collier's brothers, in particular, hoped that now she was back in New Zealand her next step might be to get married. Patricia Lonsdale remembers her father Harry's desire that Edith Collier should marry:

I know my father was always very keen that she should marry and have a large family. This was a dominant trait in the male Colliers of my father's generation. This would have been his main reason for wanting her to return.<sup>10</sup>

Edith Collier's brother Reg was equally eager to see his sister interacting more naturally and comfortably with men, and wrote a note on the bottom of one of Edith's letters to her sister Dorothy that said:

Edith has got quite a gay old spark, very shy of long necked Tim at first rushed out of the kitchen as soon as one of them would come in sight but now she nags away goodo, done more good than ten years in England. They are very curious to know what I am writing about so don't say anything.

And still part of the same letter, but on a separate piece of paper, Edith Collier commented:

I don't know what the dickens Reg has got he won't let me see it we have just had a fight over it so tell us what he said in your letter.  
Love from Edith.  
P. S. Reg is so happy.<sup>11</sup>

Edith Collier's brothers were farmers who had a very practical vision of the world and its priorities. On the whole they had little sympathy with art, or a way of life in which art was the central focus. Edith Collier's creative endeavours had not brought the financial returns that they themselves would have expected from a block of land, or the purchase of stock. Seeing little value or return from the ten years she had spent in Britain, Edith Collier's brothers now welcomed the idea that their sister might occupy a worthwhile and certainly more conventional role for a woman of her age, marrying and settling down to raise her own children instead of always assisting her siblings with theirs. Over time they began to feel uncomfortable about the family exploitation of Edith. They wished her happiness and fulfilment of her own, and since, to them, this had obviously not come through art, then the more conventional channels of marriage and family seemed more logical and dependable options.

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<sup>10</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Edith Collier to Dorothy Collier, 8 October [late 1920s ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.



In spite of the pressure to marry, Edith Collier's attitude to men remained unchanged throughout her life. Jean Stewart, the artist's niece, remembers that:

Men had no place in life for her... they were just objects to her. Just part of the furniture.... She was terribly off hand.... Men were just "its" to her, there was no sex.... She thought they were a blooming nuisance.<sup>12</sup>

While she accepted with apparently patient resignation the restrictive roles of both dutiful daughter and maiden aunt, Edith Collier seems never to have considered occupying the roles of wife and mother. For many years after her return to New Zealand, family sources suggest that Edith Collier retained her ambition to be a painter, even when this ambition was increasingly encroached upon by domestic duties and social expectations.

Edith remained committed to her dream of being an artist long after she appeared to give up all hope of a professional career. She continued to buy instructive text books about anatomy,<sup>13</sup> stayed in touch with the art scene in Britain and Europe through art journals and contemporary publications, and continued to buy expensive art materials, right up until she died. While in her public actions she increasingly assumed the roles of nurse and doting maiden aunt, privately she still harboured dreams of having a significant career in modern art in New Zealand. Edith Collier's hopes of establishing a professional reputation are reflected in her actions after her return to New Zealand. In 1925 she joined the National Art Association of New Zealand, and although a substantial amount of her time and energy was taken up with family obligations, she still managed to participate in a number of local and international exhibitions during the 1920s and 1930s.

Edith Collier's first major exhibition after her return to New Zealand was the 1926 Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society show held at the Sarjeant Gallery. This occasion was regarded by the local art establishment as a belated celebration of the Gallery's opening, a chance to view the Dominion's more 'modern' trends in painting, and an opportunity to lay to rest the embarrassment of the Mackay-Cresswell affair and begin again to establish Wanganui's place as a leading town and province in the arts of New Zealand. Plans for the occasion were made well in advance, and negotiations begun with the National Art Association of New Zealand to bring what would ultimately be another 255 works to Wanganui. The Arts and Crafts Society

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Jean Stewart, conducted, 18 May 1993.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the numerous art books Edith Collier purchased after her return to New Zealand include *Figure Composition* (1923) by Richard G. Hatton, *The Book of a Hundred Hands* (1926) by George Bridgeman, *Fifty Figure Drawings: A Selected Group of the Best Figure Drawings Submitted by the Fifty Best Drawing Jury* (1927), *The Human Form in Art* (1928) by A. A. Braun, and *Anatomical Diagrams for the use of Art Students* (1951) by James M. Dunlop A. R. C. A.

minutes recorded that the president, Mr L. Cohen, "said everything was pointing to a most successful exhibition."<sup>14</sup>

The Sarjeant Gallery's first major exhibition since its opening in 1919 became a focus of the town's civic pride. In his speech at the opening on 13 September 1926, the Mayor, Mr Hope Gibbson, summed up what the event meant for many in Wanganui:

It is my pleasant duty... to officiate at the opening of this fine exhibition of pictures, an exhibition which all must agree has never been equalled in this City.... In this splendid building, the finest in the Dominion, we have a home of art. It is, however, far more than a shrine of beauty, but it will be for all time a monument to the civic spirit and high character of the donor, the late Henry Sarjeant.... It is perhaps the most outstanding attraction to the city.<sup>15</sup>

In the exhibition Edith showed what would become a characteristic mixture of British and New Zealand works. *Mt. Ruapehu*, *Native Trees*, *Forest Sentinel* and *Over the Hills* were painted in New Zealand, while *An Irish Fisherman*; *An Irish Farmer's Wife* (possibly the *Peasant Woman of Bonmahon*); *Irish Cottages*; *An Irish Farm*; *An Irish Cottage*; *London Crossing Sweeper*; *Village Pump*; *Fisherman Moorage*, *St. Ives*; *A Street in Old St. Ives* and *Boats, St. Ives*, belong to her time in England and Ireland. Her contribution was a cautious one, mixed in location, subject-matter, and the innovations put forward. Nothing she submitted offered the insights into cubism that *A Cornish Woman of Spanish Descent* suggested, or the affront to a literal and realistic rendering of the human form of *The Lady of Kent*, but the simplified decorative abstractions of *On the Quay, St. Ives* were present in her St. Ives contribution. She chose carefully, probably with her audience in mind, and had every reason to expect a positive outcome.

The gallery's exhibition of 687 paintings, and an additional 171 photographs by Frank Denton, was reviewed in five articles published in the *Wanganui Chronicle* and *The Wanganui Herald*. Collier's work was completely overlooked in the first article published in *The Wanganui Herald* on 13 September 1926, which reported the opening of the show and identified noteworthy works by some of the show's significant contributors. This was a snub which would not have gone unnoticed, especially by the artist and her family and friends. The critic's derisive reception of modern trends in painting was saved for the second article. This review, although feigning a degree of open-mindedness, offered a very limited and parochial interpretation of modern art. The anonymous critic stated:

<sup>14</sup> Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society Minutes, 23 June 1926. Wanganui Museum Archives.

<sup>15</sup> "Arts and Crafts: Wanganui Annual Exhibition: The Keynote of Colour: An Excellent Display". *The Wanganui Herald*, Monday 13 September 1926, p. 9.

There are many examples of the latest moods of Art, of sufficient merit at any rate to warrant close attention, whatever diverse opinions there may be as serious contributions to the development of Art, or merely passing phases of no account. Roger Fry's picture of *Champerty, France*, somehow suggests the art of the nursery. He has, however, some devoted followers and admirers....<sup>16</sup>

The critic's attack on modern art was deliberate and calculated, as the work he patronisingly refers to as "the art of the nursery" by Roger Fry was hanging in the Sarjeant Gallery, but was obviously not part of the show, nor was it listed in the catalogue. Modernism was certainly his target, and unfortunately for Edith Collier, she was the show's principal local follower of its tenets.

Edith Collier was attacked more savagely than any other exhibitor in the show. Not only was her work directly criticised, but the critic's attack was both aggressive and personal in its approach:

Miss Edith Collier is yet another whose work suffers from a slavish imitation of a prevailing fad. It is hard to reconcile the good and sound work which marks her portrait of "An Irish Fisherman" (no. 71: see cat. no. 191), with the weak drawing of an "Irish Fisherman's Wife" [unlocated]. She has undoubted talent, so it is a pity that she goes out of her way to distort nature under a mistaken idea that that is the way to display originality....When too many pictures of average merit are produced every year, it becomes increasingly difficult for an artist to attain recognition, so that he is tempted to adopt some form of outrageous art, in order to attract attention. He is encouraged in this by critics, as it gives them something to write about and avoid the platitudes inevitable in describing pictures that have no striking characteristics. Moreover, there are always a number of artists and amateurs who like to assume the pose of understanding something which is unintelligible to ordinary mortals. It is even more lamentable when men who have proved their talent, skill and feeling pursue the backward tendencies, so that if there is ever to be a National School of New Zealand the younger generation of artists must seek for inspiration from what they see around them and learn to express what they feel in their own manner, and not through the medium of the fashionable cult of the moment."<sup>17</sup>

The negative response to modern painting trends, and by implication Edith Collier's work, was continued in two of the three subsequent reviews of the Exhibition.<sup>18</sup> The anti-modernist commentary reached a crescendo in the final article, in which the critic indignantly explained:

... it is only by constant and close study of good pictures that a correct taste can be acquired. It is a great pity that when means of study are at hand so many attempt to turn out pictures before they have mastered the elements of drawing and painting. The results are often so disastrous that their efforts must be a cause of anxiety to their friends.... This absence of taste marks a lack of culture, as positively as

<sup>16</sup> "Art Exhibition - Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society: Preliminary Review of the Pictures". *Wanganui Chronicle*, Friday 17 September 1926, p. 5. *Champerty, France* was loaned to the Sarjeant Gallery by a resident of Wanganui, and it was on display at the same time as the 1926 exhibition. A letter written in November 1928 which referred to the work stated: "In January 1926 my husband, John Holdsworth, lent you a picture by Roger Fry which we are pleased to find today hanging up in your beautiful Art Gallery. We now wish to offer you, also on loan, seven watercolour drawings by the late F. C. Robinson A. R. A. they are original designs for illustrations for *A Book of Quaker Souls*...." Letter from Violet Holdsworth to the Town Clerk, 12 November 1928. Wanganui District Council Archives, Wanganui.

<sup>17</sup> "Art Exhibition - Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society: Preliminary Review of the Pictures". *Wanganui Chronicle*, Friday 17 September 1926, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> The only review which does not contain negative comments about modernism is the article on F. J. Denton's photography, entitled "Camera's Triumph: Art Through the Lens: Pictorial Photography. Sarjeant Gallery Exhibits". *Wanganui Chronicle*, Friday 24 September 1926, p. 6.

a vulgar accent or want of manners. People have no excuse for this neglect of the aesthetic side of education. Drawing is well taught at schools, and there are hundreds of good text-books to be had with reproductions of the works of great masters.... I cannot see how a semblance of nature can spoil the design of any picture. Many of the "Modernists" are so eaten up by their own conventions that they look upon nature as something to be abhorred.<sup>19</sup>

For Edith Collier, the bitter blow of the first articles was followed by this further humiliation, the event becoming almost a matter of public disgrace for the reserved and retiring artist. Not only were her innovations roundly rejected, but there was an added implication that the conventions of modernism were against nature, and that those who used them were in some way socially deviant.

In contrast to this, the critic's comments about other more traditional paintings and painters were very positive. The article's concluding paragraph stated:

A. F. Nicoll and Nugent Welch have given a good lead by their sound and sincere work. In view of the number of excellent paintings on the walls at present it is sincerely to be hoped that the Council will not let this opportunity slip to acquire as many of these pictures as its funds will permit for the Gallery.<sup>20</sup>

A. F. Nicoll and Nugent Welch received further detailed and positive critical attention in the fourth and final review.

While Edith Collier was being publicly ridiculed, the event itself was heralded as a huge success. "Owing to continued patronage," an article in the *Wanganui Chronicle* stated, "the Wanganui Arts and Crafts Exhibition in the Sarjeant Gallery will not close until October 17. This will enable entrants... and residents hitherto prevented to inspect what is admitted to be the best collection of modern works ever shown in the Dominion."<sup>21</sup> Of the show's ninety-five artists listed as members of the Wanganui Arts and Craft's Society, and ninety-one artists who belonged to the National Art Association of New Zealand, the painters who emerged as stars of the show were largely dealing with New Zealand landscape. Nugent Welch, Archibald Nicoll, A. H. O'Keeffe and Marcus King, for example, painted domestic landscapes and seascapes almost exclusively. In criticism the special qualities of New Zealand's light was celebrated:

Next is No. 119, "The Butcher's Shop Marazion, Cornwall," a virile painting by C. Hay Campbell. The picture is strong in colour, and decided in light and shade. The figures are well drawn and lend human interest to the composition. No. 122, "The Breeze," is Mr Nugent Welch's only contribution in oils. It is full of sun and light, and is remarkably faithful in the rendering of the clear and bright atmosphere of

<sup>19</sup> "Among the Pictures at Sarjeant Gallery". *Wanganui Chronicle*, Friday 1 October 1926, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> "Art Exhibition - Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society: Preliminary Review of the Pictures". *Wanganui Chronicle*, Friday 17 September 1926, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> "Arts and Crafts: Exhibition: Extension of Exhibition". *Wanganui Chronicle*, Saturday 9 October 1926, p. 3.

New Zealand. Compare this with the colouring of No. 119 and you will get a very fair impression of the difference in the effect of the atmosphere of this country and that of the Old.<sup>22</sup>

Critical references to the quest for a "National School of New Zealand... artists", and for a true "rendering of the... atmosphere of New Zealand",<sup>23</sup> focus on an issue in New Zealand art that had gained momentum in the opening decades of the twentieth century. In New Zealand, landscape painting had achieved a prominence similar to that of European history painting, and almost every serious artist working in this country had to engage with it. There was also emerging at this time a chauvinistic nationalism which was beginning to rank domestic landscape and light above that of Europe. Such views were now starting to be expressed in Wanganui, and Edith, whose landscape subjects were largely British and Irish, was distinctly disadvantaged by this development.

In fact, the Wanganui Borough Council was so impressed by the show's strong New Zealand landscape component that the Council Minutes for 15 September 1926 record "that a vote up to £70 [was]... made from the picture purchase Fund, to acquire works from the exhibition now being held at the Gallery...."<sup>24</sup> As a result, paintings by Marcus King, Linley H. Richardson, A. H. O'Keeffe, Archibald Nicoll, and Nugent Welch<sup>25</sup> were purchased from the exhibition, making it the first systematic attempt on the part of the Gallery to establish a collection of New Zealand paintings, largely of New Zealand landscape. The need to have New Zealand artists represented in the Gallery's permanent collection had already been identified by Louis Cohen, the Sarjeant Gallery's honorary curator, when he wrote to the Town Clerk in July 1926:

I may say that in my opinion the time has arrived when some judicious purchases of work by New Zealand artists should be considered. It is beyond doubt that we have artists now working in New Zealand whose pictures are quite up to Gallery standards. This will probably be proved by some of the work to be shown at the forthcoming exhibition... of the Wanganui Arts and Crafts Society."<sup>26</sup>

With the 1926 Arts and Crafts Exhibition in mind, the issue of finding suitably qualified buyers was raised in letters to the *Wanganui Chronicle* editor. C. Hay Campbell wrote:

I am glad that Mr Evans has drawn attention to the indiscriminate hanging of pictures at the Sarjeant Gallery. I have long protested against the amount of sheer rubbish which still defaces the walls.... Why is there no Art Gallery Committee? Surely in such a matter as the selection of pictures it would do the

<sup>22</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle*, Friday 1 October 1926, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps, the most well-known early expression of this was William M. Hodgkins' "A History of landscape art and its study in New Zealand" (published in the *Otago Daily* in November 1880).

<sup>24</sup> Wanganui Borough Council Minutes, 15 September 1926. Wanganui District Council Archives.

<sup>25</sup> Purchased works included Marcus King's *Pink Weed* [£5:5:0], Linley H. Richardson's *A Summer Morning, Titahi Bay* [£21:0:0], A. H. O'Keeffe's *In a Blue Setting* [£12:12:0], Archibald Nichol's *Sandhills* [£26:5:0], and Nugent Welch's *Rocks and Sea* [£10:10:0].

<sup>26</sup> Letter from Louis Cohen to the Town Clerk, 21 July 1926. Sarjeant Gallery Archives, Wanganui.

Council no harm to have the advice of those who have proper training in art, and follow it as a profession.<sup>27</sup>

An Art Gallery Committee was not established in time for the 1926 Exhibition, and purchases were made by the Sarjeant Gallery Committee, which consisted of the Mayor, three councillors and a number of other artistic identities round town, including Mrs Neame. Although the exact composition of the Sarjeant Gallery Committee is unknown, it appears that Edith Collier was not considered for membership of the group, nor was her work purchased. The Gallery's acquisitions were conservative, reflecting the wishes of Henry Sarjeant, the conventional taste of the committee, and the elevated and instructive role that they believed art should fulfil.

Edith Collier was left feeling alienated and utterly discouraged by the reception of her work. She had been ridiculed by the local newspaper, and was now regarded as bizarre and slightly suspect by many people in Wanganui.<sup>28</sup> However, the hostile nature of this first critical response to her work did not affect the artist alone. Henry, a conservative and conscientiously religious man,<sup>29</sup> was equally distressed by the degree of public shame that the exhibition had brought himself and the Collier family. He would certainly have agreed with many of the misgivings expressed by the critic about modernism and, and by extension, morality. As a result, his anger with his daughter finally boiled over, and, in the later part of 1926,<sup>30</sup> Edith Collier came home one day to find that Henry had deliberately destroyed a number of her finest paintings and studies. Although the flames are reputed to have consumed mainly paintings of nudes and studies from life, other works are likely to have perished as well.<sup>31</sup> Describing the disturbing events of that day, Jean Stewart, the only other person present at the burning of Edith Collier's paintings, recalls:

<sup>27</sup> C. Hay Campbell, "Correspondence: The Sarjeant Gallery", Tuesday 26 January 1926, p. 6. Council Minutes, Wanganui District Council Archives, Wanganui.

<sup>28</sup> In interviews with Jean Stewart on 18 May 1993 and 21 October 1997, Jean made the point that Edith was considered "odd" or "eccentric" in Wanganui. Many people knew she had been away in Britain, and, as they saw it, had returned with some rather peculiar ideas about art. Living as a single woman with her two spinster sisters at Ringley compounded existing suspicion of her in many quarters. This view of her has been confirmed in discussion with other residents of Wanganui who remember Edith Collier.

<sup>29</sup> Henry Collier was an active member of St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, playing the organ at Sunday services for over two decades.

<sup>30</sup> The burning of Edith Collier's paintings and studies occurred in 1926, when Jean Stewart, who was born on 11 November 1921, was about five years old. Janet Paul states that the paintings were burned in 1922 (*Edith Collier in Retrospect*, Wanganui, 1980, p. 16), and Anne Kirker's writing on Collier assumes it (*New Zealand Women Artists*, Auckland, 1984, p. 64). This is incorrect. Jean Stewart assisted Henry Collier in carrying the works to the fire, and she is firm in her belief that she was four and a half to five years old when she did so.

<sup>31</sup> Patricia Lonsdale and Jean Stewart are convinced that the burning of Edith Collier's work involved a great many more paintings than the "one ... finished [painting] of a nude and many studies from life" outlined in Anne Kirker's *New Zealand Women Artists* (Auckland, 1987, p. 64). As Patricia Lonsdale states, "Edith told me herself that a much better portrait of my father [Harry], painted in England, had been part of the fire. I gather it was more modern in technique, so we will never know what besides the nudes went as well." Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993. Jean Stewart remembers carrying no fewer than six large oil paintings to the fire herself, while Henry Collier took more than one load. Interview with Jean Stewart conducted 21 October 1997.

Well I would say that I would be possibly four and a half to five.... when poor Edie went out to do the weekly shopping in the car... as soon as she had disappeared around the side of the house... Grandpa got up and put on his homburg hat and said to me, "Come on.".... And I followed him.... we went... across to where Edith had a cottage with 2 bedrooms and a big sort of lounge thing, and all her paints and paintings were there. And I can remember Grandpa going in and looking at them all leaning against the wall and he came across these nudes, and saying, "Disgoostin, disgoostin".... He was a very austere, strict man.... Anyway, his hands were full, he had about three in either hand, and then he started giving them to me and I think I had one in either hand, and followed him out and struggled through the damp grass.... And then he struck a match, and got a bit of paper... and these paintings started to burn.... He was putting one on top of the other, it was quite a fire. And I remember standing there very dejected, and tears running down my face because I felt sorry for Edie's work being burnt.... Even at that stage I knew it was some awful calamity, really. And I remember saying... to him, "Grandpa don't burn Edie's paintings". And he said, "Oh, be quiet".... I didn't say a word more, but he just kept on burning these jolly things... they burnt quite freely. And I can remember seeing the light dancing... we went back into the [studio] again.... [we made more than one trip] back in. And then, that was that, we finished up and went over to the house....

Nobody said anything, but in a little while, in a half hour or so, I remember Edith arriving with all the groceries.... and I said to her, "Edie Grandpa's burnt your paintings". And she said, "What!"... and went off down to the dinning room where Grandpa was, and got onto him about it. They had a very wordy battle really, 'cause Edie could stick up for herself, and she really was upset about it.... Edith was really cross and she called him a stupid old fool and things like that. They had a really intense battle for a few minutes.... I think his big thing was the nudes bothered him.... A family upset, a household upset....<sup>32</sup>

By the time Henry burned Edith Collier's paintings he was both cantankerous and ill. Always a short-tempered man, with age this quality grew more pronounced and problematic. Prone to acts of violence against his sons,<sup>33</sup> his destruction of his daughter's work might be viewed as a continuation of that same violence, this time against property and not the person. It is highly probable that Henry's actions were prompted by art critics' and public responses to his daughter's work. While he may have harboured his own private doubts and resentment about her painting and career, he certainly had reserved judgement until this, her public trial. What he had hoped would be a triumphant vindication of his investment in her career, and her nine year sojourn in Britain, had become instead an occasion of disgrace and embarrassment. His daughter's work, it now seemed, would never be valued by the social and artistic elite which he aspired to impress, nor would her paintings enter the permanent collection, nor grace the walls of the revered Sarjeant Art Gallery. She was in his eyes a complete failure and embarrassment.

The debacle of the 1926 Arts and Crafts Exhibition was the catalyst for the burning, but the personal and private motives that propelled Henry towards this extreme act of destruction four years after Edith Collier's return to New Zealand are more complex. Henry was almost certainly envious of his daughter's talent. He was angry and frustrated by what he perceived to be her lack of motivation after her return home. Jean Stewart remembers, "He was wild

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Jean Stewart conducted 21 October 1997. The works were not, then, burnt while Edith Collier "went to Wellington on a visit" (*Edith Collier in Retrospect*, Wanganui, 1980, p. 16).

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Hazel Collier, Joan Maher, and Barbara Stewart (Taihape), 16 May 1993.

because she wasn't painting and [he] thought her training had been a waste of time and money."<sup>34</sup> Henry mentioned Edith Collier's quiescence in a letter to his sister Ada in Britain, to which she responded in late 1922:

I was interested in Edith's lack of enterprise, but perhaps one morning she will rise up and make a fortune and make us all feel small.<sup>35</sup>

Disappointed in the return on his investment in her career, by the mid 1920s Henry obviously felt he had waited long enough for his daughter "to rise up", and acting as both judge and executioner by burning her work, he inflicted the most psychologically damaging blow he could.

Henry was an intensely conservative and austere man, whose life had been guided, and at times goaded, by a rigid commitment to the Protestant work ethic. God's Grace, for him, was therefore reflected in the bounty of his achievements, both personal and financial. Henry was intimately involved with St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, playing the organ at Sunday services for many years. He was undeniably a pious pillar both of the Church and of the community at large. In line with this, he had sent his daughter to Britain on what was essentially a mission to consolidate a considerable God-given talent which was potentially not only socially advantageous, but also lucrative. His vision and investment were rewarded by what he considered to be lurid examples of bohemian dalliance, which bordered on the sacrilegious. He was inevitably shocked to the core, and horrified to think of further public revelations of his daughter's misplaced sense of propriety. Although Edith Collier had not exhibited her most modern work in 1926, public and critical reaction to what she did show was a disturbing foretaste of what would happen if her nudes were displayed in Wanganui. He found his private doubts and personal distaste given public expression in the critical condemnation of her work. As a result of public castigation, Henry saw himself as having the right, if not obligation, of censorship, destroying nude and modernist paintings that he believed to be considerably more degenerate than those that had already been condemned. He intended his actions to remove for all time the cause of his shame, and to punish as much as to censure or control this 41 year old woman.

The burning of Edith Collier's nudes in 1926 makes an interesting comparison with the experiences of the Christchurch artist, Evelyn Polson (later Page), who, in the same year, exhibited three paintings of nudes with the Canterbury and Auckland art societies. In March, *Sunlight and shadow*, *The green slipper*, and *Figure out of doors* were given a positive review

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Jean Stewart conducted, 19 May 1993.

<sup>35</sup> Letter from Ada Collier to Henry Collier, 5 November [1922-1925 ?] Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.



in *The Press* by Dr Lester, who described how "Miss Polson in a striking group of large oils seems to have caught most successfully, the inspiration of Mr Sydney Thompson."<sup>36</sup> In June, however, the *Auckland Star* published this letter:

Dear Sir,

I have been a visitor at the Society Exhibitions for a number of years and until this year, have been impressed by the fact that the committee have seen fit to eliminate all pictures which have a tendency towards an immoral suggestion, but on this occasion, I must voice my indignation that a picture having such characteristics as the one entitled "Figure Out of Doors" should have passed the hanging committee. Simply there are enough doubtful pictures to be seen in the theatres without the Society of Arts having to enter for this class of support. They would be better without it.

I am - Purity<sup>37</sup>

While Dr Lester saw fit to discuss Evelyn Polson's contribution to the show in terms of its stylistic relationship to the work and influence of New Zealand's leading Impressionist painter, Sydney Thompson, the pertinent issue for many New Zealanders of this period would have been whether the nude was a fit subject to hang at all. Art audiences were accustomed to a limited and very conservative range of subject matter; portraiture, still-lives, and an "overwhelming preponderance of pure landscape"<sup>38</sup> dominated local art society shows. As Priscilla Pitts contends in her article "Evelyn Page: Reflecting the Human Presence", "One thing is clear: that in this period of New Zealand art (ie. the 'twenties and thirties) painting the nude, and even more certainly exhibiting such paintings, was rare.... [and] the cries of moral outrage occasioned in Auckland by Evelyn Polson's nudes suggest that visitors to exhibitions were... unused to seeing such subject matter."<sup>39</sup> The lack of an established tradition of history and religious painting in New Zealand inevitably left audiences ill-prepared for nudity in art, which, as in this case, was often interpreted as frivolous licentiousness.

Edith Collier and Evelyn Polson both used the nude as a significant subject in their oeuvre, and they were both criticised for doing so. While Polson's impressionistic, atmospheric, high coloured images of naked young women outdoors attracted a public backlash in 1926, Edith Collier's nudes (with the exception of *The Lady of Kent*) remained publicly unseen. Though Henry Collier's burning of his daughter's nudes reflects the attitudes of "I am - Purity", his actions also suggest a deeper, more personal, sense of disgust. It is certainly possible that Henry's reaction, though apparently a pious personal response to nudity, came from a deep seated sense of homophobia which had its origins in the Mackay-Cresswell affair, and which in this case feared the sexual and political implications of a woman who paints other women naked. If Henry had only a vague sense of what a lesbian might be, then it is quite possible that it occurred to him that his daughter might be one. Given that Edith was unmarried,

<sup>36</sup> *The Press*, 20 March 1926, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> *Auckland Star*, 22 June, 1926, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> A. Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists: A Survey of 150 Years*, Sydney, 1993, p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> P. Pitts, "Evelyn Page: Reflecting the Human Presence". *Art New Zealand*, No. 26, p. 23.

unlikely ever to marry, and openly cynical about men, her obvious interest in painting women naked could well have disturbed him deeply.

Edith Collier's ventures into modernism made her subject matter even more offensive. While the subject of Evelyn Polson's *Figure out of doors* shocked New Zealand audiences because of their unfamiliarity with the nude, they accepted the impressionist manner in which it was painted. Impressionism, with its loose, more explicit brush work, and emphasis on light, atmosphere and colour, was a manner of working introduced to New Zealand around the turn of the century by painters like James McLachlan Nairn, and made more popular by the competence of exponents like Sydney Lough Thompson, who, as Julie King points out, was by the "1920s... acclaimed as a successful New Zealand artist."<sup>40</sup> The innovations implicit in Edith Collier's work with the nude, however, had no precedence. It is impossible to know how many modern nudes were destroyed by Henry, but even the few that survive refer to ideas quite foreign to anything that would have been viewed in art societies and on academy walls in New Zealand up to that time. *The Lady of Kent* (1917-1918), with its flattened picture space, emphasis on design, and ambiguous treatment of the female form, displays an obvious allegiance to the ideas of Post-Impressionism, while later works such as *Figures by Pool* (c. 1919), *Frivolity* (c. 1919) and *Folly* (c. 1919) show an awareness not only of the lyrical decorative work of Matisse, but also of Japanese and Chinese print makers. Edith Collier's nudes, at this point, were unique in New Zealand.

The uniqueness of Edith's work, however, offered little solace or consolation to Henry who had no sympathy or understanding of the modernist innovations they encapsulated. After the burning of her paintings, Edith Collier found her self-confidence and stamina for surviving such blows greatly challenged. "Buffets and Knocks"<sup>41</sup> in the public sphere were now reinforced by this disaster in her private life. Considering in retrospect the impact of the event of 1926, Patricia Lonsdale writes:

I am not sure which would have been the most devastating for her, Henry's destruction of her work or the poor publicity on her return to New Zealand. Although it would have broken her heart when so many of her paintings were destroyed by Henry I think the most difficult and hurtful would have been the "unsympathetic and ignorant criticism". Her own family would have been included in this as I would suspect that few of them understood or recognised her work. Encouragement would have been lacking, particularly when they were young, after her return from England. This was when she needed support.... Her father's act could well have been the final blow.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> J. King, *Sydney Lough Thompson: At Home and Abroad*, Christchurch, 1990, p. 75.

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Edith Collier, 18 February [1922 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

Although Edith Collier did produce work after the burning of her paintings, in the ensuing years she worked sporadically, producing a body of work and then stopping, and as she grew older the gaps between these bursts of activity became longer and longer.

Encouraged by her friend Eulalie Goldsbury to escape the recent emotional turmoil of Henry's burning, Edith Collier removed herself to Kawhia to relax and work for a time uninterrupted. Remembering the event, Jean Stewart states:

Eulalie Goldsbury... and Edie formed a very close friendship. She was nice to Edie and appreciated her work.... They decided they would go up to Kawhia painting... apparently Miss Goldsbury had a single brother up there and he arranged for them to rent this cottage. They stayed up there for six months.<sup>43</sup>

One of Edith Collier's most creative times in her artistic career after she returned to New Zealand was the painting series produced at Kawhia in the late 1920s. At Kawhia, Edith Collier was free to work all day while her companion organised meals and kept house. Patricia Lonsdale remembers:

... Miss Goldsbury... is the one person who tried to get her started again. They went up to Kawhia, basically a Maori settlement on the north west coast somewhere out from Hamilton.... This is the place I think that she could have got going again if she had only been encouraged by the family instead of being a chopping block for all the nieces and nephews as they were born.... She loved the Maori women, I don't think she ever painted a Maori man.

I think Kawhia reminded her of Ireland and Cornwall. She has told me how wonderful those places were and how wonderful the people were.... All artists need to bury themselves in order to create, I think so anyway, and Edith never had a chance to get away and never pushed for herself. She was completely unselfish, perhaps this was her cross to bear.<sup>44</sup>

Responding to the isolation and solitude of Kawhia as she had to that of Bonmahon and Cornwall, Edith Collier produced numerous portraits of Maori women, group figure studies and scenes of the Kawhia Harbour and the surrounding landscape. Edith Collier found the energy and enthusiasm to be consistently creative again while she was living and working in an emotionally supportive environment.

Approaching her Kawhia subject matter in a manner similar to the one she used in Britain, Edith Collier simply replaced the peasants and fisher-people of Bonmahon and Cornwall with the Maori of New Zealand. Dressed in similar clothes and posed in similar positions and compositions, the Maori women of Kawhia provided material which was both familiar and fresh for the artist to paint. While Edith Collier's Kawhia paintings represent a renewal of her vigour for art in the late 1920s and early 1930s, they do not reflect a direct continuation of the experimental ideas she had begun to involve herself with a decade earlier. Though very fine paintings, *The Korero* (see cat. no. 458), *Mrs Pouhanu of Kawhia* (see cat. no. 455), and

<sup>43</sup> Interview conducted with Jean Stewart, 21 October 1997.

<sup>44</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

*Kawhia Harbour* (see cat. no. 465) are more representationally conceived than her British work. While it could reasonably be argued that Edith's work at Kawhia represents a compromise of her St. Ives achievement, it must equally be stated that her Kawhia paintings stand particularly strongly and convincingly among other paintings of Maori executed in New Zealand between the 1920s and 1950s, such as those of H. Linley Richardson, Christopher Perkins and Ivy Margaret Copeland. For instance, Richardson, an English born and trained artist who settled in Wellington in 1908 and taught at the Technical College School of Art, was well known for his depictions of Maori. But these paintings were illustratively and academically conceived, their value existing, like the work of Charles Frederick Goldie, largely in their literal recording of likeness and way of life. This is clearly evident in Richardson's *Portrait of an Old Maori Woman* (c. 1930), which shows little or no awareness of Post-Impressionism or modern European innovations.

If *Portrait of an Old Maori Woman* offers something less interesting than Collier's *Mrs Pouhanu of Kawhia* and *Maori Woman*, then the deficit is even more apparent when her paintings are compared with the illustrative, sentimental, and sometimes ugly work of Christopher Perkins. Perkins' paintings and sketches of Maori are certainly his least successful New Zealand work. Paintings like *Maori Meeting* (1932-1934) are uncomfortable constructions of what, it seems, Perkins hoped to find in New Zealand. P. W. Robertson wrote in a 1931 issue of *Art in New Zealand* that Perkins, "accepted the offer of a teaching post in New Zealand, envisaging it in his enthusiasm as a temperate version of Gauguin's Tahiti, exotic with rich flora and a vigorous native art."<sup>45</sup> What Perkins found, of course, was something quite different, but it is this difference that he failed to acknowledge or include in his images of Maori and their environment. Essentially, Christopher Perkins' vision remains that of a British tourist, with paintings like *Maori Meeting* offering a superficial understanding of Maori life, and an equally naive interpretation of New Zealand landscape.

In contrast to Perkins' work, Ivy Margaret Copeland's paintings of Maori offer a more accurate and sympathetic interpretation. Copeland was born in Auckland in 1895, and studied there at the School of Art under Charles Goldie. She later moved to Wanganui and taught at the Technical School, receiving additional tuition herself from D. Seaward at the same time as Edith Collier was enrolled as a student. In paintings like *The Market Garden* (also known as *Maori Women Gathering Kumera*) (1950) Copeland demonstrates her interest in Maori subject matter, which probably had its earliest beginnings in her lessons with Goldie. *The Market Garden* is painted in a high key Post-Impressionist palette, reminiscent of that of

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<sup>45</sup> P. W. Robertson, "The Art of Christopher Perkins". *Art in New Zealand*, September 1931, p. 11.

Gauguin's Tahitian works. Ivy Copeland depicts scarfed Maori women dressed in a manner similar to that of peasants, and working in the fields. The painting shares Collier's high skyline, painterly use of brush work, and modern simplified approach to depicting figures and landscape. In another untitled work, Copeland even depicts her scarfed peasant-like Maori figures on the edge of a lake very similar to Kawhia. While Copeland may have seen works such as *The Korero* exhibited, it is more likely that she developed her approach independently of Collier, and largely as a consequence of a 1930 Education Department scholarship to travel to Europe. Copeland's paintings take a similar approach to Edith Collier in the depiction of Maori, but Copeland was working twenty-five years later, in the late 1940s.

Edith Collier's contribution to the representation of Maori, completed while she was staying at Kawhia, secured a limited, but continuing critical interest in her work as a New Zealand artist. Though these paintings do not contain the rigorous formal innovations of her mature British work, they were regarded as strong, capable paintings which inevitably placed her in an alternative and strictly New Zealand discourse, which dealt with the issue of a New Zealand school or style and interpretations of uniquely New Zealand subject matter, in this case the Maori. After the burning of her paintings, it is unlikely that Edith Collier felt confident enough to challenge convention or deviate from the norm in her subsequent work. As Elizabeth Plumridge points out in her article, "The Thwarted Career of Artist Edith Collier", that "this pressure for Women to produce the 'merely pleasing' had a detrimental effect upon Collier's painting during the years after her return to her family, and was a pitfall for all women artists",<sup>46</sup> but it must also be remembered that Collier had now entered a different artistic environment with a new set of priorities which paid only lip service to matters of European modernism.

Unfortunately for Edith Collier, following an established pattern, her visits to Kawhia came to an end all too soon as she was called home by her mother to nurse and care for the increasingly cantankerous Henry:

Her mother always thought it her daughters' duty to be home looking after her and the house. This is evident in some of the letters in the house.<sup>47</sup>

Although her time and work at Kawhia came to a premature end, Edith Collier's close connection with Eulalie Goldsbury was not similarly truncated. It was at this point, and with Eulalie, that Edith Collier revived her pattern of supportive female friendships in a manner similar to those she had enjoyed in Britain. Eulalie Goldsbury, a nurse who had been

<sup>46</sup> E. Plumridge, "The Thwarted Career of Artist Edith Collier". *Comment*, No. 11, June 1980, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> This quotation comes from notes made by Barbara Stewart for her 1994 radio interview on Edith Collier.

certificated at Christchurch Public Hospital in 1920, became involved in the ongoing care of Henry. Living very close to Ringley and staying at the homestead for considerable periods of time, Eulalie Goldsbury maintained her intimate connection with Edith Collier until the artist's death in 1964. Eulalie Goldsbury died just two years later in 1966.

Around the time she produced the Kawhia paintings, Edith Collier made a concerted effort to extend her artistic activities beyond the confines of Wanganui, exhibiting with the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington in 1927 and 1928. Her participation in the two academy shows was one of Collier's early opportunities to be viewed by a public beyond Wanganui. Her contribution to the 1927 exhibition included *Where the Bell Bird Sings*, a New Zealand work, and *The Lady of Kent*, *Village by the Sea*, *The Little Schoolboy*, *Study of an Oak*, and *The Barn* which were all executed during her stay in Britain. Edith clearly made a considered decision (apart from flouting her father's authority) in re-exhibiting *The Lady of Kent* nearly a decade after its first appearance at the Society of Women Artists in London. Her aim in this show was to strike a modern note, and this was certainly acknowledged in the critical review: "[Edith Collier's] name will be found on what may be taken as an example of the latest direction taken by artists," wrote Wellington's *Evening Post* critic. "It is 'A Lady of Kent [sic]', a picture of a nude girl stiffly posed, seated on a verdant and conventionally drawn setting, with Oast houses in the background."<sup>48</sup>

If Edith Collier was disappointed by the critic's lack of interest, or ability to engage with what these modern directions might be, Frances Hodgkins, who sent *Summer Joys*, *By the Brook*, *Barn at Picardy*, *After the Bath* and *Threshing in Full Swing*, could have been equally disappointed in not being mentioned at all. It is interesting, yet understandable, that the critic identified Collier's submission as modern, but failed to say the same of Hodgkins. Hodgkins' contribution reflects her solution to a problem expressed to her mother in 1921: "The reason I don't send out more work to N. Z. is that it has become a bit too modern & I find it very difficult to return to my earlier & more easily selling style."<sup>49</sup> Her difficulties in appealing and selling to a conservative New Zealand market, she hoped in 1927, might be overcome, not by changing to an earlier style, but by sending work that belonged to an earlier period. Hodgkins could at this time in her career have sent fluid, free, ambiguous, almost abstract landscapes such as *Tréboul* (1927) and *Market at Concarneau from a Window of the Hôtel des Voyageurs* (1927), which would have had the critics grabbing for their note books; instead, she chose magnificent passages of almost nineteenth century impressionist painting.

<sup>48</sup> *The Evening Post*, 16 September, 1927, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Rachel Hodgkins, 14 April 1921. Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, p. 353.

*Summer Joy* (1916), a sensitive image of mother and child outdoors (not unlike the works of Mary Cassatt), *Barn at Picardy* (c. 1921), and *Threshing in Full Swing* (c. 1919) were still more engaged with light and atmosphere than the flat picture surface or calligraphic strokes of the brush. Essentially, Frances wanted money from the show to survive and keep painting in Britain, while Edith could more easily afford the luxury of being modern in New Zealand.

Other notable female exhibitors in the show included Rhona Haszard, Ngaio Marsh, Evelyn Polson, Olivia Spencer-Bower, Margaret O. Stoddart, D. K. Richmond and Elizabeth Kelly. The engagement of these women with modern elements in their work depended largely on what generation they belonged to and what exposure they had to overseas training and art. Rhona Haszard, a comparatively young exhibitor, was in Europe at the time of the show, experiencing the beginning of a significant change in her work. Anne Kirker states:

Rhona Haszard's new 'modernist' style was close to that of the Camden Town painters in England who freely distorted and simplified forms but at the same time remained true to outward appearances. The flat, plane-like treatment of rock forms and an almost undifferentiated expanse of sea and sky in *Finistère* is similar to Haszard's canvas *Sardine Fleet, Brittany* which was hung [in this show] and the Paris Salon of 1927.<sup>50</sup>

Of Haszard's contribution to the exhibition, *Sark Cottages* and *The Cock* were enthusiastically endorsed by the critic, while *The Chinese Inkpot* was complimented particularly for its colour and design and described as the "finest picture of its kind [still life] in the collection."<sup>51</sup> The Post-Impressionist style that Haszard was evolving at this stage was high-coloured, with a thick application of patch-like decorative paint, but her subject-matter remained conventional and the compositions and forms largely undistorted. This approach maintained her works' accessibility, and her favour with the critics.

While Rhona Haszard was sending work from overseas and engaging with European modernism, a much more significant number of the show's participants were dealing primarily with the issue of painting the New Zealand landscape. Margaret Stoddart, D. K. Richmond, Grace Butler (with *Wintertime, Arthur's Pass* reproduced in the catalogue) and Olivia Spencer Bower were the principal women working in this area. This generation of intrepid women painters provided an essential role model for female creativity in New Zealand, one of a strong and enduring professional commitment to artistic pursuits. Leaving the comfort of their homes they travelled (sometimes together) to remote mountain areas in search of new and challenging ideas and iconography. Margaret Stoddart, in particular, took other women on her excursions and her "lessons were ones," as Julie King suggests, "which may well have

<sup>50</sup> A. Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists: A Survey of 150 Years*. Sydney, 1993, pp. 66-67.

<sup>51</sup> *The Evening Post*, 16 September, 1927, p. 8.

benefited Olivia Spencer Bower, who, along with Cora Wilding, used to go on [these] sketching trips...."<sup>52</sup> Although women's contribution to landscape painting in New Zealand, and in fact to this show, was an impressive one, as was often the case, the loudest critical accolades went to men. "An outstanding landscape by Mr [Archibald] Nicoll, 'Change of Wind' should on no account be missed," wrote the critic. "There will be found movement as well as form in the great travelling cumulus clouds, and the whole is truly typical of New Zealand, yet free from the suggestion of a coaxing appeal to prospective tourists."<sup>53</sup> Once again, criticism richly rewarded what was perceived to be "truly typical" New Zealand landscape.

It can reasonably be argued that *The Lady of Kent* was the 1927 Academy show's principal "example of the latest direction taken by artists", so it is interesting that Edith Collier should change her direction so completely in the Academy exhibition of the following year. Her submission for the 1928 show was taken exclusively from work produced in New Zealand, the images including *Evening*, *After the Storm*, *Korero*, *Mrs Tirotiro Ponui* (almost certainly *Mrs Pouhanu of Kawhia*), and *Kawhia Harbour, Low Tide*. Apart from the obvious fact that most of these paintings were recently executed during her stay at Kawhia, it is likely also that there was a conscious decision on Edith's part to exhibit subject-matter that, while being treated perhaps in a less modern manner, was more strategically located in the critical debates and discussions of New Zealand art. Her efforts were rewarded by critical mention in *The Evening Post*: "'Korero', by E. M. Collier, showing a group of Maori women talking, is remarkable for its grouping and colour."<sup>54</sup> Though she was mentioned early and positively (if somewhat briefly) in the review, Edith Collier did not exhibit with the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts again until 1945.

The critic's very positive response to D. K. Richmond's rather conventional *Marigolds* (reproduced in the catalogue) and her "memorable" *Zinnias* of the previous 1927 exhibition may well have signalled to Edith Collier that the Academy was not the most appropriate venue for her work. Conservative traditional contributions from people like "Menzies Gibb, a stalwart and constant supporter of the New Zealand annuals shows",<sup>55</sup> made up the majority of exhibits. Apart from some notable exceptions, like Rhona Haszard, who exhibited four works, and Frances Hodgkins, who exhibited two, there was little that would have interested Edith. Even Sydney Thompson's more adventurous *Frosty Morning, Grasse; Market, Grasse;*

<sup>52</sup> J. King, "Margaret Stoddart: The Landscapes of a Canterbury Flower Painter". *Art New Zealand*, No. 31, p. 49.

<sup>53</sup> *The Evening Post*, 16 September, 1927, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> *The Evening Post*, 29 September, 1928, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*



and *A Breton Girl*, and Evelyn Polson's *Helen in the Long Grass*, *Portrait of Painter's Father*, *Convent Quiet* and *Jim* would have seemed to refer to an impressionist tradition which was passé for her. Edith Collier's problem now was to find an exhibition venue that was sympathetic to her innovations and interested in her work with Maori and New Zealand landscape.

An opportunity to exhibit with a more experimental group of artists came just a year later when she was invited to contribute work to the founding exhibition of The Group at Christchurch in 1929; she then exhibited with The Group again in 1931. Edith's invitation to show with The Group came in part as a consequence of her 1927 and 1928 Academy reviews which identified her as a modern and potentially interesting artist. But perhaps more importantly, she sent works to The Canterbury Society of Arts in 1927 and 1928, which would have given the art community in Christchurch an opportunity to examine her work. For the Canterbury Society of Arts shows, Edith returned to her practice of sending a selection of both British and New Zealand work. In 1927 she exhibited *A Grey Day*, an Irish work, and *Over the Hills* and *Reflections*, two New Zealand paintings; in 1928 she showed *Lady of Kent: a decorative panel*, *The Little School Boy*, *A Village by the Sea*, *The Barn* and *A Study in Oak*, all British paintings, and *Where the Bell Bird Sings*, a New Zealand image. Edith's contribution to these exhibitions became more modern as she became more sure of her reception.

The 1929 Group show, however, offered Edith Collier her most interesting and experimental New Zealand venue yet. Even though Ngaio Marsh (one of The Group's instigators) said of their intentions, "we were not a bunch of rebels or angries, we were a group of friends",<sup>56</sup> Julie Catchpole is accurate in her assertion that "The Group exhibitions did come to provide an outlet for more progressive artists to exhibit works in various media."<sup>57</sup> Edith was honoured by her invitation to join such a select gathering. Again she sent a selection of overseas and domestic pictures: her New Zealand contribution included *Korero*, *After the Storm*, *Scene at Maungaraupi*, *An Old Inhabitant of Kawhia* (also known as *Maori Woman*), *Morning at Maungaraupi*, *A Pastoral Scene*, and her British submission, mostly from her time at St. Ives, included *A Country Road in Cornwall*, *A Sailor's Son*, *An Alley in St. Ives*, *On the Quay at Old St. Ives*, *A Barn at Bibury*, and two wood engravings, *Farmhouse in Ireland* and *Street in Old St. Ives*, both executed in 1921. Professor Shelley considered Edith Collier's

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in J. Catchpole's "The Group". M. A. Thesis, University of Canterbury, p. 5.  
<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* p. 9.

contribution to the 1929 Group show in Christchurch, and found her work to be "interestingly experimental":

[While] The portrait of a 'Maori Woman' is good, sound painting, especially successful are the hands. The most successful method with this painter seems to be the charcoal drawing with washes of colour, as in 'Country Road in Cornwall' and 'Barn at Bibury,' both with good light and air. The wood-engravings show a good decorative understanding of the medium. The 'Sailor's Son' seems to be striving after something not quite realised - the light problem is one of the most difficult in all painting, and there seems to be a lack of tone in the chin and neck."<sup>58</sup>

Overlooking some of the more truly experimental aspects of her work, Professor Shelley focuses his favourable comment on work which conforms more readily to a stylistically conventional approach. As Gordon Brown perceptively points out:

....when his comments from 1929 are analysed, the quality he seeks is not the skilful method of pictorial construction with its interpretation of elongated rectangles and triangles, as demonstrated in *An Alley in Old St Ives* (*Roofs and Chimney Pots*, *St. Ives* is a better example but was not included in the 1929 exhibition), but the more easily understood traditional nineteenth-century aspect of 'light and air'. His most searching observations are reserved for those works either in an earlier style or the retrograde style Miss Collier adopted for her late New Zealand paintings.... What Shelley appears to have ignored is the change in the artist's criteria for picture making of which the Cornish watercolour-drawings are the clearest examples. These works show the artist awaking to the twentieth-century concept of pictorial space where the visual experience gained from nature borders on the edge of abstraction....<sup>59</sup>

The 1929 Group, with its strong showing of female talent, would have seemed a familiar and appropriate alliance for Edith. The Group was an exhibiting body whose momentum came from the talent and drive of its women members. In this show<sup>60</sup> there were nine exhibitors, seven women and two men. The 1929 exhibition reflected the strength of its female talent with much of the show's critical accolades going especially to Evelyn Polson, but also to Ceridwen Thornton, Cora Wilding and Viola Macmillan Brown. The show's male members received only a brief mention, W. S. Baverstock for his "well known cartoons", and W. H. Montgomery for his "vivid tropical painting, *Bananas*." Evelyn Polson, in fact, was credited with having "the most interesting picture in the gallery", and Professor Shelley's comments were reported in *Art in New Zealand*, describing her *December morn* (also known as *Summer morn*) as "a finely composed piece of decorative realism - real enough for us to enjoy the brilliant sunshine, and decorative enough to suggest that it might be called 'Variations in Green and Pink.'"<sup>61</sup> Even at this early stage in her career Evelyn Polson was well on the way to, as Neil Roberts describes it, "develop[ing] her palette as much as ... the human interest of her subject matter. Her treatment of colour [was to give] her a place as one of New Zealand's

<sup>58</sup> Professor Shelley, "Art Notes: Christchurch". *Art in New Zealand*, Vol. 2, No. 5, September 1929, p. 142.

<sup>59</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, pp. 24-27.

<sup>60</sup> In 1927 a small group of artists, most of them members of the Canterbury Society of Arts, held two exhibitions. These exhibitions included work by Ngalo Marsh, Viola Macmillan Brown, Evelyn Polson, Margaret Anderson, Edith Wall, W. H. Montgomery, and W. S. Baverstock. These exhibitions resulted in the 1929 founding show of The Group.

<sup>61</sup> *Art in New Zealand*, December 1929, p. 141.

foremost colourists."<sup>62</sup> Evelyn Polson's impressionist nude, standing holding the foliage of a willow in the dappled, reflected light of a river, would no doubt have seemed breathtaking to audiences at the time. It is undoubtedly a fine painting, magnificent, almost jewel-like, but once again it broke taboos of subject-matter and transgressed the boundaries of propriety; however, in this exhibition, which proclaimed the right to "be vigorous and independent",<sup>63</sup> it seemed to have a fitting venue. Thornton was complimented on her portraiture, and Wilding and Macmillan Brown for the strength of their landscape. Without a doubt, the 1929 Group show was a women's coup, and it can fairly be argued that Edith's failure to attend the opening, or make lasting professional connections with women like Polson, Wilding and Macmillan Brown, was a lost opportunity which had a detrimental impact on her career in New Zealand.

There was no catalogue produced for the 1931 Group show so it is not possible to give a complete list of the images sent by Edith Collier; however, *Hyde Park in Autumn*, *A Fisherman's Cottage*, *St. Bartholomew's Church*, *An Irish Fisherman* (British work), and *At the Edge of the Bush* (a New Zealand scene) are mentioned in critical reviews of the show. It is interesting to note that Edith's British contribution to the 1931 exhibition came from an earlier, less artistically adventurous time in her stay overseas. Professor Shelley's interest in her more conventional work would have encouraged this change. However, while Shelley, in fact, could be criticised for missing the point in his discussion of Edith Collier's work in the 1929 show, Edith Collier's contribution is scarcely noticed at all in reviews of the 1931 Group exhibition. Obviously thrilled and excited by the sudden influx to The Group of male talent, Dr G. M. Lester describes work in the exhibition as being "represent[ative of] a definite attitude towards art, one of revolt and experimentation."<sup>64</sup> Buoyed by a new optimism for the weight of the male contribution, Dr G. M. Lester framed his comments about art and artists in male heroic terms. He stated that:

To paint simply what is demanded of him is for an artist to condemn himself. His ambition must be to express himself. The revolt is against the whole body of convention in art, a convention that has filled the Royal Academy in London with mediocrity for the past seventy years, a fettering of ideas which meant that the pretty, sentimental stuff must go on the wall, or unpopularity result. The pretty pot-boiler must gather up her skirts and go."<sup>65</sup>

Equally, Professor J. Shelley believed "the 1931 Group [had] been strengthened enormously since its last public appearance by the addition of artists of high standing such as Messrs

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<sup>62</sup> Janet Paul and Neil Roberts, *Evelyn Page: Seven Decades*, Christchurch, 1986, p. 57.

<sup>63</sup> *The Christchurch Times*, 10 September, 1929, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> "A Fresh Artistic Outlook: The 1931 Group Exhibition Successfully Opened". *The Christchurch Times*, 10 September 1931, p. 2.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*

Shurrock, Field, Boxall and Cook."<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, the reviewer for *The Christchurch Times* gave less attention to the work of Edith Collier, and summed up her entire contribution in two sentences:

A highly "modern" note is struck in some of the work of Miss Edith Collier. While in some examples the effect is a little unconvincing, her "St Bartholomew's Church" and "A Fisherman's Cottage" leave no doubt as to her capabilities.<sup>67</sup>

Although Edith Collier is credited with striking a highly "modern" note, the nature of this note is never explored. While the critic acknowledges Collier's experimentation in the first sentence, in the second it is patronised and dismissed. By choosing to acclaim only her most conventional paintings, the critic safely maintains a footing on familiar aesthetic ground which does not challenge the writer's understanding of modern art, nor display his limitations. The critic provides his readers with no analysis of the innovatory features of Edith Collier's painting, and little more than a cursory consideration of her contribution as a whole. Conversely, the critic is captivated by the work of such favoured male exhibitors such as Francis Shurrock, R. N. Field, W. S. Baverstock, d' Auvergne Boxall and James Cook.

The 1931 exhibition was again a select group, this time of six male exhibitors and four women. In reviews of the show, critical credit for the most modern approach to painting went to R. N. Field, an English born La Trobe artist who arrived in New Zealand in 1925, and was teaching at the Dunedin Technical School of Art. Field's ideas on painting had been influenced by the Post-Impressionists, and his work, like Rhona Haszard's, was reminiscent of the Camden Town Group of English painters whose painting was high-coloured and decorative, but on the whole did not facet, fragment, or distort the forms. "Only four, perhaps five, of Field's works have been traced from the 1931 Group exhibition",<sup>68</sup> but from these, it is easy to see why his submission made such an impact: "Of all exhibitors, perhaps, Mr. Field threw out the strongest and most insistent challenge to the fetish of mere representation. In his use of colour, the nature of his composition and the idea behind his work, the modernist attitude is predominant."<sup>69</sup> The brilliantly coloured pointillist work, *Christ at the Well of Samaria*, would easily have earned such praise. Unconventionally composed, the figure of Christ, with his back to the viewer and head in profile, dominates the canvas. He faces a decorative, frieze-like, highly keyed group of figures, and the overall effect is one of rich, swirling, patch-like colour. The more closely worked *Doreen* (a painting of a Dunedin artist,

<sup>66</sup> Professor J. Shelly, "Exhibition at Art Gallery. The 1931 Group. Work of Importance". *The Christchurch Times*, 14 September 1931, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> A. K. C. Petersen, *R N Field: The Dunedin Years 1925-1945*. Manawatu Art Gallery, 1989, p. 50.

<sup>69</sup> "The 1931 Group Exhibition". *Art in New Zealand*, December 1931, p. 122.

again composed with the figure's back to the viewer), though more closely worked and muted in colour, was equally capable, and again Post-Impressionist in its references. As A. K. C. Petersen states, "reactions to Field's modernism were just part of the general historical process by which many nineteenth century conventions and assumptions were being gradually discarded as obsolete during the 1920s and 1930s in New Zealand.... Field was to play a major role in opening up the way for the acceptance of modernism, and modern art in Otago and Canterbury, and for the subsequent development of modernism by some artists during the 1940s and 1950s."<sup>70</sup>

While Field's paintings "challenged the fetish of representation", Evelyn Polson's *Interior* was judged as one of the best pictures in the exhibition. "Miss Evelyn Polson has the most impressive picture of them all," wrote the critic for *The Christchurch Times*. "It shows a girl standing just past a door through which a diffused light streams. In drawing and colouring it is remarkably telling. As an example of "revolt," it gives the new movement a wonderful impetus."<sup>71</sup> Again, Polson's high-keyed impressionist painting asserted her capability as a painter, and her "revolt" was still one that had a general appeal. Amongst the other contributors, Francis Shurrock, a La Trobe recruit who taught at the Canterbury School of Art from 1927 until his retirement, was judged as capable, though conventional. His sculpture, which was able but representational, was considered his strongest achievement. d' Auvergne Boxall and James Cook were also judged technically "splendid" realists, and W. S. Baverstock was again commended for his selection of "virile and intriguing cartoons."<sup>72</sup> Without a doubt Field, Polson and Collier stood out as the most exciting contributors to the show.

While negative response to Edith Collier's work was most strongly expressed in parochial Wanganui, her contribution to The Group shows was equally problematic. In this situation negativity was replaced by misunderstanding and neglect, and was equally distressing for the artist to deal with. In the 1929 show her work was viewed in the context of images by Polson, Thornton, Wilding and Macmillan Brown, all of their paintings more diligently reflecting their academic training than Edith Collier's. Critical commentary assessed her achievements according to a critical vocabulary and criteria that were both outmoded and inappropriate, and in the 1931 Group show she was largely overlooked in favour of reviewing a more prestigious male contribution, or in following the fortunes of the Christchurch exhibition favourite, Evelyn Polson. Edith Collier did not exhibit again with The Group after the 1931 show. She

<sup>70</sup> A. K. C. Petersen, *R. N. Field: The Dunedin Years 1925-1945*. Manawatu Art Gallery, 1989, p. 47.

<sup>71</sup> *The Christchurch Times*, 10 September 1931, p. 2.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

was not invited again, nor did she solicit further invitations. It is probable that in its beginnings The Group promised for Edith a New Zealand parallel to the Society of Women Artists or Women's International Art Club, but once The Group constituted both male and female exhibitors in almost equal numbers, and ill-informed and biased reviews revealed that there would be little understanding or appreciation of her work, she lost interest.

In the summer of 1931-32, Margaret Preston, now residing in Sydney, visited Edith and wrote a very positive account of the recently erected Wanganui Art Gallery for the February issue of *Art in Australia* (1932). Far from experiencing the difficulties that Edith had faced on her return home, by the time Margaret Preston visited her friend and colleague in Wanganui, she was already one of the best known artists in Australia. Commenting on the reasons for her popularity as an artist, Dorothy Dundas writes:

She was very productive and she always saw that her work was promoted in a way that was not usual then, but which is taken for granted now. She was very alive to the importance of promotion and used her very strong personality to see that her articles appeared and that her illustrations appeared. She was constantly before the public eye.<sup>73</sup>

Ambitious for recognition and personal fulfilment, Margaret Preston pursued her career as a politician might approach an election campaign. When she arrived in Wanganui just after handing over her self-portrait to the Trustees of the Gallery of New South Wales, Margaret Preston was very much at a peak in her career. As a guest of the Collier family, Margaret Preston's brief visit to Wanganui must have made obvious the sharp contrast between her character and experiences, and those of her erstwhile pupil. While Margaret Preston aggressively pursued her personal career in art, "Edith Collier was of a retiring nature, a person of few words, at times almost taciturn.... She was undemonstrative and - like her paintings - very matter of a fact. Yet, she was generous and kindly - one who neither sought nor enjoyed the lime-light...."<sup>74</sup> In contrast to artists like Margaret Stoddart who sent works to exhibitions in Paris on numerous occasions after her repatriation, and to Sydney in 1926,<sup>75</sup> Edith Collier made no attempt after her return to New Zealand to exhibit overseas. Though Margaret Preston may have appeared a possible avenue through which to become involved in the Australian art scene, it is unlikely that Preston ever encouraged Collier in this way. Margaret Preston, though responsive to women artists' needs and issues, was primarily out to promote her own artistic endeavours. She had been ruthless in terminating her relationship with Gladys Reynell and choosing instead the social acceptability and financial security of marriage, and would have been equally ruthless in dispensing with any other burdens or impediments to her career.

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in E. Butel, *Margaret Preston: The Art of Constant Rearrangement*. Victoria, 1986, p. 22.

<sup>74</sup> T. M. Barrett, *Edith Collier Retrospective Exhibition*. Wanganui, November 1971, p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> J. King, *Flowers into Landscapes: Margaret Stoddart 1865-1934*. Christchurch, 1997, p. 12.

Though Edith Collier made few efforts to exhibit again after the 1930s, the art scene in New Zealand, by contrast, entered one of its liveliest phases. The beginnings of change appear particularly in the work of Rata Lovell-Smith, though the foundations had been laid by landscape painters like M. O. Stoddart, D. K. Richmond, and Archibald Nicoll. Art historians Ann Elias and Anne Kirker both credit Rata Lovell-Smith with playing a major role in redirecting New Zealand painting, and this is undoubtedly true. Ann Elias writes:

Rata Lovell-Smith played a significant part in redirecting New Zealand painting in terms of subject matter and style. At an early stage in the development of the theme of Regionalism in New Zealand landscape painting, she showed an interest in subjects that were characteristic of the localities.... She presented her subjects as straight-forward images of these regions with bold colours, clean edges, and a brightness intended to reveal every object in the composition since the effectiveness of her paintings as regional statements depended on the clarity of these images.<sup>76</sup>

Landscape became primary, and Lovell-Smith's boldly designed canvases, with flat areas of sometimes heightened, largely unmodulated colour, and mundane rural buildings as a central motif, pointed to a new way of painting and a new set of preoccupations. Rata Lovell-Smith received her education at the Canterbury University College School of Art in Christchurch, and represents the beginning of a new breed of domestically trained artists whose oeuvre was dominated by the priorities of a particularly New Zealand vision. Paintings like Lovell-Smith's *Back country, Lake Selfe area* (1929) appalled critics because of its poster-like flattening of the image, which reached a fuller and less compromised achievement in her magnificent *Hawkins* (1933), a high-coloured, simplified painting of a rural railway station. Rata Lovell-Smith's work celebrated the regional, the mundane, the ordinary, and to New Zealand critics this would soon offer its own appeal.

While it appears that Rata Lovell-Smith's regionalism was informed by imported art books and magazines from Canada and Britain,<sup>77</sup> Christopher Perkins arrived in New Zealand during this period with a very different training and background. Having studied in London at the Slade School of art, his artistic interests and priorities lay with the French-Post Impressionists, especially Gauguin. His ambition, from the beginning of his brief stay, was to produce regionalist icons of New Zealand scenery, which placed subject-matter and

<sup>76</sup> A. Elias, "Rata Lovell-Smith". M. A. Thesis, University of Auckland, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> In writing about the influences that informed Rata Lovell-Smith's work, Ann Elias states: "The Lovell-Smiths had the opportunity of expanding their knowledge of poster-designing from articles written on the subject in the *Studio* and *Art in New Zealand*, as well as exhibitions of posters brought to New Zealand from Britain. One exhibition of posters was brought to New Zealand in 1927, and another was held in Wellington in 1934 of posters from the London Passenger Transport Board [p. 26].... The Canadian Group of Seven painted subject matter in a manner which has been described as showing a tendency towards a broad decorative style with a flattening of the image, a stressing of large, bold forms and movements and an emphasis on sharp tone contrasts.... Rata Lovell-Smith would have had access to the Group of Seven through the *Studio*.... Canadian artists were far more likely to have affected Rata Lovell-Smith's age-group of painters in New Zealand than Grant Wood, Edward Hooper, or any other American artist." A. Elias, "Rata Lovell-Smith". M. A. Thesis, University of Auckland, pp. 49-50.

symbolism on an equal footing with formal issues. As Emily Lawton writes in her thesis on Christopher Perkins:

... he could combine to his own satisfaction two important themes in his painting: landscape and abstraction....<sup>78</sup>

He was trying to synthesise what were to him typical elements of New Zealand topography with the design existing in his imagination. To him this design probably did reflect a harmony, a grand order, which he sought to find and demonstrate in nature.<sup>79</sup>

In 1931, two of Perkins' 'icons' were reproduced in *Art in New Zealand*: these were *Silverstream Brickworks* (1930) and *Taranaki* (1931), and *Silverstream Brickworks* was later exhibited in 1932 at The Group show. Perkins' *Taranaki* remains his most well-known and hauntingly New Zealand painting. A provincial rural milk treatment station was chosen as the principal man-made structure, but this was cleverly nestled at the foot of the awesome volcanic cone of Mt. Taranaki. Tightly painted with sharp-edged geometric forms and muted colour, *Taranaki* remains a simplified, evocative, but highly representational image. As Michael Dunn points out: "This type of mild modernism, coupled in New Zealand with a regionalist emphasis, was to be a popular and influential force in the 1930s and 1940s."<sup>80</sup> Perkins' approach was formally accepted by critic A. R. D. Fairburn, whose article "Some Aspects of N. Z. Art and Letters" stated that:

There is no golden mist in the air, no Merlin in our woods, no soft warm colour to breed a school of painters from the stock of Turner, Crome, Cotman and Wilson Steer. Hard, clear light reveals the bones, the sheer form, of hills, trees, stones and scrub. We must draw rather than paint, even if we are using a brush, or we shall not be perfectly truthful. The paintings of Christopher Perkins are a healthy influence, moving as they do toward a true and knowing expression of our landscape.<sup>81</sup>

While leading artists, especially in Canterbury, were forging icons of New Zealand regionalism, Edith Collier continued to paint local landscape and portraits, but did not exhibit again until the late 1930s. In May 1937 she was among the artists selected to represent New Zealand at the Empire Art Exhibition assembled at the Royal Institute Galleries in London. It is not known who chose Collier to represent New Zealand for this show, nor has a catalogue for the exhibition been traced; however, her selection certainly establishes the fact that Collier's reputation was still remembered and appreciated by significant figures on the New Zealand art scene. The British *Studio* magazine published a review of the Empire Art Exhibition, but the New Zealand contributions were not mentioned, so there is no record of what Edith sent. In 1938 she was once more selected to represent her country at the International Business Machines Corporation Exhibition in New York. The 1937 and 1938

<sup>78</sup> Emily M. Lawton, "Christopher Perkins: The New Zealand Years". M. A. Thesis, University of Auckland, 1975, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* p. 32.

<sup>80</sup> M. Dunn, *A Concise History of New Zealand Painting*. Auckland. 1991, p. 76.

<sup>81</sup> A. R. D. Fairburn, "Some Aspects of N. Z. Art and Letters". *Art in New Zealand*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1934, p. 215.



exhibitions were significant public acknowledgments of her value as an artist, and in both cases she was selected independently of any actions on her part to gain inclusion. She was invited to represent New Zealand at the Empire Art Exhibition based on the exhibiting reputation she had already established in New Zealand, and in the case of the International Business Machines Corporation Exhibition in New York, one of her sisters submitted work without Collier's knowledge or permission. A 1938 *New Zealand Free Lance* article described the circumstances surrounding her selection:

It appears that a big business firm in New York (the International Business Machine Proprietary Ltd.) is buying two pictures in each of 79 countries. A representative of the firm arrived at Wellington, got in touch with the National Art Gallery, and invitations were sent to well-known artists to submit pictures typical of New Zealand landscape and life. Miss Collier remarked to her family that she had nothing to send and anyway she didn't want to sell any work, but a business like younger sister just packed up two paintings, both of Kawhia harbour, and dispatched them to Wellington - with a happy result. You may remember that pictures of Miss Collier's were chosen among others to be sent from New Zealand to the Empire Art exhibition a year or so ago. The other New Zealand painting bought for exhibition is a landscape by Mr. Archibald Nicoll....<sup>82</sup>

In addition to these prestigious shows, Edith Collier was also invited by Mary Fuller<sup>83</sup> to exhibit in the 1939 Centennial Exhibition of International and New Zealand Art. (Mary Fuller may also have invited Edith to exhibit in the Empire Art Exhibition, but this cannot be substantiated.) To the Centennial show Edith contributed a total of seven works: five oils, one watercolour and a charcoal drawing. All the works included in this show, with the exception of *The Kitchen, Table* (see cat. no 379), were works she had completed after her return to New Zealand. *Mrs Pohanui, Kawhia; Pastoral Scene, Taihape; Forest Sentinels;* and *Charcoal Study - White Pines* were exhibited along with two new and very fine portraits, one of a family farmhand called *Old Charlie*, and another of her young niece *Margaret Rose Marie*. Edith's New Zealand subject matter was more appropriate to the over-all theme of the exhibition, and also more palatably conventional. The exhibition catalogue stated the show's intention of "bringing the public into direct contact with the works of eminent contemporary painters overseas as well as those of [our] own country.... In the New Zealand section... the foremost painters of the Dominion are represented by typical examples of their best work."<sup>84</sup> The show's ultimate achievement, for New Zealand audiences, was an opportunity to measure against British painting the degree of cultural progress made in this country and give "a surer indication of the growth of a distinctly national genius."<sup>85</sup> It is significant that, in an exhibition where New Zealand painting was hung "as a delightful note of interrogation"

<sup>82</sup> "America Will See Kawhia Harbour". *New Zealand Free Lance*, 9 November 1938, p. 21.

<sup>83</sup> Mary Fuller and her husband Edwin Murray Fuller were key figures in the artistic life of Wellington from 1920 to 1945. Mary Fuller organised exhibitions in 1935, 1936, 1939 and 1940, and "at different times [both she and her husband were] on the Council of The New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington; with [Mary Fuller also] on the Committee of Management of the National Art Gallery." Ann Calhoun, "Two Wellington Entrepreneurs of the 'Thirties: The Murray Fullers", *Art New Zealand*, No. 23, p. 20.

<sup>84</sup> *Centennial Exhibition of International and New Zealand Art*. National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1939, n. p.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

against "Europe's best", that Edith's "best" and most "typical" work was considered that which she had produced domestically in the nearly twenty years after her return. Edith's New Zealand career, at this time, was certainly not considered thwarted by the art establishment.

The more interesting domestic contributions to the Centennial Exhibition reflect the achievements of some of the new generation of New Zealand trained regionalist painters. Though the older guard of artists like Archibald Nicoll, Roland Hipkins, Linley Richardson, and even Grace Butler were included in the show, a new group of Christchurch painters such as Rata Lovell-Smith, Rita Angus and William A. Sutton, who were beginning to make their presence felt at a national level, were also invited to participate. In fact, as Julie Catchpole observes:

In the 1930s and '40s, the critics had noted that certain features were shared by a number of Canterbury-based painters, such as an emphasis on draughtsmanship and, in paintings, the use of line or simple masses of colour articulated by tonal gradations to define form. These qualities could be seen to a greater or lesser extent in the work of ... Rita Angus, Ngaio Marsh, Louise Henderson, Rata Lovell-Smith, Phyllis Drummond Bethune, Leo Bensemann, Olivia Spencer Bower and in some of the painters who joined in the late forties.... This suggests that perhaps there may be a recognisable 'Canterbury Style'.<sup>86</sup>

In the Centennial Exhibition, Rata Lovell-Smith was represented by a still life and five high country regionalist scenes from Canterbury, Otago and Westland. Rita Angus submitted a portrait and two paintings of the Canterbury and Otago regions, while William Sutton sent two landscapes from the Loburn area, and two paintings produced round the city of Christchurch.

As the exhibition programme promised, these New Zealand works were viewed in the context of 568 works of art from Great Britain, France and Belgium. Most of the overseas paintings were for sale, but there were also a number of significant loan pictures which the exhibition conveners felt very fortunate in borrowing, after a special Act of British Parliament in 1936 allowed pictures from the National and Tate Galleries to leave England for the first time. Among the works on loan were a group from the Tate which included *Lady in Furs* by William Nicholson, *Portrait of Dame Madge Kendal* and *The Model* by William Orpen, *Rachel* by August John, *The Red House* by Stanley Spencer, and *Woman* by Mark Gertler. There were also a number of watercolour and oil paintings by John Singer Sargent, which were lent by the artist's sister. The show was an unparalleled achievement, especially considering escalating conflict in Europe. It was undoubtedly an honour for Edith to be included.

The following year, 1940, was a significant year in the history of New Zealand, and an equally important year in the history of New Zealand art. To commemorate one hundred years of colonial settlement, a grand exhibition was organised. Plans for the show were published in a June 1939 edition of *Art in New Zealand*:

New Zealand art... will range from the work of the earliest surveyors and artists, who visited New Zealand before white settlement, up to and including the best contemporary art.... Commencing with these early works, [there will be] a complete survey of the first hundred years of art in New Zealand.... It was not intended that the exhibition should be confined to one centre, but that it should be displayed in the main centres and towns of the Dominion [and a] well-produced catalogue, complete with biographical notes and illustrations, would be compiled and this would afford a valuable historical record of New Zealand art.<sup>87</sup>

The catalogue for the show was, indeed, a considered and valuable historical record of New Zealand art. The introduction by A. H. McIntock ranked the exhibition as "one of the outstanding features of our Centennial Year." Though this event was intended as a complete and unprecedented celebration of significant practitioners in the history of New Zealand art, Edith Collier was not included. "In the early years of this century New Zealand, indeed, was not devoid of talent," wrote McIntock in his introduction. "She possessed many young artists of great promise, some of whom like David Low, Frances Hodgkins, Heber [sic] Thompson, Eleanor Hughes, and Owen Merton, journeyed abroad in search of wider opportunities."<sup>88</sup> Among Collier's generation of expatriates (or, at least, those who studied overseas) she was not mentioned. Because of the exhibition's high national profile, this exclusion undoubtedly had its impact. After the 1940 show, Edith produced only another three paintings that are extant today.

The artistic directions that McIntock pointed to in New Zealand art would have made more sense to a generation of domestically trained artists than to Edith. He concluded his essay with the comment:

Although it is quite apparent that at the present time New Zealand is far from possessing an art truly national, the future is not without promise. The interesting and praiseworthy efforts of young New Zealanders to interpret the characteristics of their country without undue reliance upon European styles and methods are slowly but unmistakably influencing the development of painting throughout the Dominion.... If New Zealand is to make her own contribution to the spiritual achievements of mankind, her people must display an intelligent and sympathetic interest in the culture of their country.<sup>89</sup>

Rita Angus, though she would not have seen herself as especially privileged or singled out, belonged to the younger generation that McIntock had in mind. Her iconic *Cass* was one of thirty-two images reproduced in the publication, and certainly one of the more contemporary

87 "A Century of New Zealand Art", *Art in New Zealand*, Vol. 11, No. 4, p. 209.

88 *National Centennial Exhibition of New Zealand Art*, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1940, p.

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89 *ibid.* p. 16.

representations. Angus' painting of *Cass* was the crystallisation of efforts by New Zealand artists to produce an archetypal New Zealand image, and a realisation of A. R. D. Fairburn's admonitions that "we must draw rather than paint, even if we are using a brush, or we shall not be perfectly truthful [to the New Zealand landscape]."<sup>90</sup> Like Rata Lovell-Smith's *Hawkins*, *Cass*' central motif was a lonely high-country railway station, surrounded by the jutting, barren, burnt-dry ridges of the Southern Alps. The image was flattened, high-coloured, and calligraphic like the work of a Japanese print maker. Inconspicuous and mundane it might seem, but it was certainly a stepping stone in the direction of a national art. Rita Angus, like Rata Lovell-Smith, had received her education at the School of Art in Christchurch (she enrolled in 1927). The fortunes of *Cass* reflected the fortunes of much of the work Angus produced at this time: it was exhibited first in Christchurch in 1937, then again in Auckland in 1938, with no critical response. As Anne Kirker points out, she was "admired only by a discriminating group of friends",<sup>91</sup> but these friends were influential.

In 1940 Edith Collier was fifty-seven years old, and at this point she largely retired from her artistic endeavours. Edith Collier's cousin Fannie in Manchester had continued to offer moral support while Edith struggled with her career in New Zealand. Fannie responded with enthusiasm to news of Edith's success in the 1938 International Business Machines Corporation Exhibition. To Edith's sister Dorothy, she wrote:

Will you tell Edith how glad I was to hear of her pictures going to the New York Tour? I wish I could see her and her work. I was mighty fond of her. She is a horrible correspondent. I wrote two long letters and never got a reply and always meant to write another but never got it off. Send her my love.<sup>92</sup>

Still supportive of her cousin from afar, Fannie's many letters and newspaper cuttings about the art scene in Britain display her enduring wish to encourage. Fannie made a number of attempts to visit "the New Zealand Colliers" before her death in September 1962. In an undated letter to Dorothy, Fannie wrote:

You wont get a shock, but I investigated the possibility of coming to see you for 3 months. Alas there is no hope of visitors getting a passage for four years - there are 250,000 people waiting for passages. So my little plan came to nothing. I was grievously disappointed for I should have loved to have seen you all. Edith and I would have got shocks when we met for it is a long time since we saw each other, but we would have survived and no doubt told each other how well each has worn!<sup>93</sup>

Although Fannie worked long hours on the academic staff at Manchester University and had many commitments of her own, she continued to try and assist Edith Collier in every way she could:

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<sup>90</sup> A. R. D. Fairburn, *Art in New Zealand*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1934, p. 215.

<sup>91</sup> A. Kirker, *New Zealand Women Artists*, 1993, p. 92.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Dorothy Collier, 13 June 1941. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>93</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Dorothy Collier, undated, 1947-1950 [?] Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

I am ordering the M/C [Manchester] Guardian weekly to be sent to Edith, it contains all the artists of more permanent interest that have appeared in the daily papers. I am an ass for not having thought of this before; I don't see why it didn't dawn on me....<sup>94</sup>

....I wonder if Edith remembers Mrs Unwin - I took her to tea there many years ago when Prof. Unwin was alive. Mrs U was an artist - she is 80 now and hasn't painted for many years. She had a great thrill last year: a portrait of a child she painted 45 years ago was sent to her to be cleaned and for a joke she cleaned it and sent it to the Royal Academy - it was accepted and hung in a good place and got a lot of praise. It was very nice for her in her old age.<sup>95</sup>

The distress of a fire in 1941 which burned the Wakarua family homestead to the ground, destroying a number of Edith's paintings drawings and prints, would have been to some extent offset by the news that she had been honoured by the purchase of *Portrait of My Uncle* (see cat. no. 355) for the national collection. An article in *The Evening Post*, reporting the purchase, stated: "At a meeting of the Council of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts last week, it was decided to purchase three pictures by New Zealand artists for the national collection. The purchases are being made with funds granted to the academy by the board of governors of the Thomas George Macarthy Trust. The pictures are:- 'Self Portrait,' by Raymond McIntyre (oil painting); 'Portrait of My Uncle,' by Edith Collier (oil painting); and 'Ohau River' (tempera), by Esther Hope."<sup>96</sup> The interest in purchasing Edith's work again reflects an awareness by the Academy of her reputation as a significant New Zealand artist, and probably came as a consequence of her recent inclusion in the Empire Art Exhibition (1937), and the Centennial Exhibition (1939). Two decades after her return to New Zealand, and ironically not long before she virtually ceased painting, Edith Collier finally had a work selected for the national collection.

Although two paintings of special significance to the sixty year old Edith were given pride of place at the autumn Academy of Fine Arts exhibition in Wellington in 1945, by this time she had ceased painting. For this bracket of companion works, Edith painted her young nephew, Carey, in his Air Force uniform, as she had painted his father, Harry, in his leather flying gear twenty-five years earlier. She completed the canvas of *Sgt.-Pilot Carey Collier* in 1942, because she had a special attachment to her nephew, and as a favour to her family. Although it can be argued that *Sgt.-Pilot Carey Collier* represents a compromise of the painterly innovations she developed in Britain, it must also be acknowledged that this painting was produced primarily for her own enjoyment, and at the very end of an artistic career spanning more than forty years. Critical reaction to the companion paintings was very positive, and an

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<sup>94</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Dorothy Collier, 10 October [1940 ?] Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>95</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Dorothy Collier, undated, 1935-1940 [?] Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

<sup>96</sup> Undated article from *The Evening Post* [1941?] Barbara Stewart's Papers, Wanganui.

unidentified newspaper article reviewing the show stated: "Many people will award the laurels of the autumn Academy of Fine Arts... to that modest Wanganui artist, Miss Edith Collier, for a bracket of portraits that would grace any national gallery. In father and son, Lieut. H. W. Collier, M. C. R. F. C., and Sergeant-Pilot Carey Collier, R. N. Z. A. F., her brother and nephew, she typifies New Zealand air-fighters of two wars...."<sup>97</sup>

In spite of this very public encouragement, opportunities to work had already grown fewer for the "modest Wanganui artist", as she nursed her father and then her mother. "Edith," wrote a sympathetic friend, "I guess you have had a long trying time, nursing first one then another in their last days. I hope your mother didn't have any pain to suffer in the last."<sup>98</sup> Eliza's death in 1945 marked the end of an era. Victorian in her own conditioning and ideas, Eliza greatly influenced the lives of both her sons and daughters. Seeing her female children, especially, as having a domestic and caring responsibility to the family, she was ever reluctant to see them abdicate or neglect what she perceived to be their role as prescribed by both God and Nature.

On the death of their mother Eliza, the three unmarried Collier daughters, Edith, Dorothy and Bethea, were left to run the homestead at Ringley on their own. Being somewhat ahead of his time in this respect, Henry Collier had left "a sizeable amount [of farm land] to his nine children in equal parts, girls the same as boys. So in the wash up the girls did very well."<sup>99</sup> Economically independent now, Edith Collier and her sisters lived on at Ringley for the rest of their lives with all their financial needs taken care of. Having always lived with the security of a comfortable home and a father wealthy enough to support them, Dorothy, Bethea, and Edith Collier had had no need to earn a living. Even though she had trained to teach art in Britain, Edith Collier did almost no teaching on her return to New Zealand. Wanganui had a number of avenues available for teaching, from private tuition at home, to school teaching at one of the numerous public or more prestigious private schools, and perhaps more obviously at the Wanganui Technical School. Taking only an occasional student for lessons on a casual basis, Edith Collier certainly made no substantial income from teaching art, though this may in part be explained by the fact that she does not seem to have passed all her teaching examinations in Britain. Nor was it necessary for her to raise money by selling her painting. As Patricia Lonsdale points out, in retrospect:

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<sup>97</sup> Unidentified newspaper article. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>98</sup> Letter from Ted and Beryl [?] to Edith Collier, 1 February 1946. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>99</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

The reason we have such a complete collection of her work today is that she could not bear to part with any of her work. But then she did not have to. Home was comfortable. It was easy. So, apart from the rejections, perhaps it was easier to stay at home.<sup>100</sup>

Because she was never pressed to compete commercially, nor to seek a position as a teacher, Edith Collier was able to occupy an amateur role as an artist. Without the economic incentives of hardship or need, she never made the connection between professionalism and painting.

Edith Collier's creative output was publicly recognised during the later part of her life by an exhibition in Wanganui in 1955, and another at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington in 1956. In addition to the two main venues, Wanganui and Wellington, the same collection of works was also seen at the Auckland City Art Gallery, and at galleries in Hamilton and Napier. The exhibition consisted of sixty-two works, which were grouped into four categories, according to location. The London section consisted of ten works, Ireland seventeen, St. Ives sixteen, and New Zealand twenty-three. Edith selected the works for the show herself, and a handwritten list with scratchings-out and replacements reflects the conscientiousness of her deliberations. The show included a number of experimental works which had never before been showed in New Zealand. Works like *A Cornish Woman of Spanish Descent*, *An Old Salt of St. Ives*, *A Little Housewife*, *Roofs & Chimney Pots* and *On the Pier*, St. Ives had never been viewed in public and, in fact, many works were newly framed for the show. Without a doubt, Edith Collier was intent on displaying her work at its best and most experimental, yet interestingly she did not attend any of the openings, even though the event at the Sarjeant Gallery, which was a substantial civic occasion, occurred just a few miles from her home. In the text which accompanied Edith's retrospective exhibition at the National Gallery, S. B. MacLennan described her "as a painter who has earned a very distinguished place in the art of this country."<sup>101</sup> For the seventy-year old Edith Collier, who received these tributes and was now honoured by both the Sarjeant Gallery and New Zealand Academy, the accolades were ironic and almost unwelcome.

In reality, the irony cut more deeply than Edith Collier is likely to have realised. The probable motive for this exhibition came not from a direct appreciation of her oeuvre, but from a growing interest in the late 1940s and 1950s in the careers of New Zealand artists whose work was influenced by international modernism. This interest was fed by an

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<sup>100</sup>     ibid.

<sup>101</sup>     S. B. MacLennan, "Edith Collier's Art in Fine Exhibition". Wellington, 1955, n. p. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery Wanganui.

increasing flow of art books and magazines into the country. Gordon Brown writes in his article "The Pursuit of Modernism in the 1940s and Early 1950s, 2":

Further encouragement resulted from the flow of art books and magazines that increased steadily from about 1948 onwards. Among the more readily accessible titles was the series *Penguin Modern Painters*, which included over a dozen monographs on British painters, as well as the Americans Ben Shahn and Edward Hopper, and one European, Paul Klee. But more important was a small series of basic texts published in New York under the title *The Documents of Modern Art*. Among the authors were Duthuit on the Fauves, Apollinaire and Kahnweiler on the Cubists, Hans Arp and Max Ernst on the Dadaists and Surrealists, Kandinsky, Mondrian and Moholy-Nagy on non-objective art.<sup>102</sup>

These texts offered a comprehensive understanding of the intentions of modernism (couched in historical and authoritative terms), and a persistent promotional argument for its validation and acceptance. Artists, and the art intelligentsia of New Zealand, were now being evangelised and converted. Hard-line traditional attitudes were melting in the face of a new tradition and authority. Though mapped-out in purely stylistic terms, Gordon Brown defines this new tradition as "... frankness in the way the painted surface declares itself... frankness in accepting that a painting is essentially something constructed out of formal qualities as line, tone-value, shape, colour, texture and pattern.... [and] frankness in accepting that a painting is made on a flat piece of canvas or board...."<sup>103</sup>

In Wanganui, the early signs of conversion took the form of an exhibition in August 1954 of work by Harry Miller, Colin McCahon, and Toss Woollaston. Of R. N. Field's two most promising protégés, an article in *The Wanganui Herald* stated:

Colin McCahon and Toss Woollaston may be regarded as among the "wild men" of New Zealand art - Colin McCahon especially, for he has gone straight to the Fauves for his inspiration. There is little of the New Zealand tradition and not much of New Zealand landscape (as we have been taught to see it) in his painting, and it takes some time to assimilate his work.... Woollaston's work suggests that whatever the medium, he is always sketching - against time, against changing light and against the fleeting impression.... His earthy colours may be monotonous - someone has referred unkindly to "Mapua Mud"... and some may wish for more form in his work. But he is an artist seldom ignored by the critics and should not be dismissed lightly.<sup>104</sup>

While the modernity and newness of McCahon and Woollaston's work was cautiously admired, the painting of Harry Miller, a style "to which we are accustomed", was given only passing attention. The New Zealand critical environment, even in provincial centres like Wanganui, was more receptive to modern elements from abroad, and particularly to a young generation of "wild men", than it ever had been before.

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102 G. Brown, "The Pursuit of Modernism in the 1940s and Early 1950s 2". *Art New Zealand*, No. 31, p. 51.  
 103 G. Brown, "The Pursuit of Modernism in the 1940s and Early 1950s", *Art New Zealand*, No. 30, p. 29.  
 104 "'Wild Men' of NZ Art in Exhibition", *The Wanganui Herald*, 19 August 1954, p. 4.



In paintings like *Takaha Night and Day* (1948) and *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury* (1950), Colin McCahon initiated a shift in the criteria for picture-making, from the magnificent regionalist landscapes of Rata Lovell-Smith and Rita Angus, to a new stark, simple vocabulary of barren primal spaces, where light and darkness become an internal metaphor for spiritual values, rather than an etching tool defining the contours of a generic geography. McCahon's painting reflected many aspects of international modernism, both theoretical and stylistic. His interest in Cubism, particularly, was to influence the direction of his work, especially in his use of architectural form. Nowhere is this more evident than in *I AM* (1954), a work which plays with the pictorial possibilities of Cubism, yet employs an ironic, teasing, contemporary sensibility. Toss Woollaston's work was equally influenced by modernism. He found valuable mentors in both R. N. Field and Flora Scales; Scales introduced him to Cubism and the Fauves, and the work of Hans Hoffman. In Woollaston's small-scale landscapes of the late 1930s and 1940s, such as *Landscape with Pine Trees* (1939), *Mapua after Rain* (1939), *Tasman Landscape* (1943) and *Upper Moutere in Summer* (1945), he established the subdued palette of earth colours with which he became synonymous. Formally he was uncompromising, awkwardly cropping figures and landscape to achieve an unbalanced placement in the frame, and using clusters of untidy brush strokes to define form, with calligraphic strokes to represent details, and leaving large areas of canvas bare to disrupt illusionistic space and draw attention to the flat picture plane.

Another event which had a bearing on the Collier show was a much anticipated exhibition of the painting of artist John Weeks: "Rarely, if ever, has Wanganui had the opportunity of seeing a one-man art show of the size and quality of the... Weeks exhibition," wrote the critic for *The Wanganui Herald*. In July 1955, a total of 175 of his works were exhibited at the Sarjeant Gallery, having been loaned by the Auckland City Art Gallery. An article in *The Wanganui Herald* described the show:

It is a retrospective exhibition spanning 45 years of rich endeavour by this great artist, named by editor of the Year Book of the Arts in 1947 as the "greatest living New Zealand artist.... [Weeks trained with L'hote, who] was a cubist painter, Cubism has probably been the vital influence in 20th century art, and John Weeks was early attracted by the work of Cézanne, Picasso, and Braque.... He has been open to new ideas and the Continent has exerted a strong influence to produce vigour and strength in his interpretation of our landscape.<sup>105</sup>

John Weeks' career, his vision, and his manner of painting was influenced by his experiences and training abroad, and this was an aspect of his life which now, at the point of his retirement from a thirty-four year teaching career at Elam School of Art, was gaining renewed critical interest. Though born in England in 1886, Weeks was largely educated in New Zealand, and

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<sup>105</sup> "John Weeks Art Display Opens Monday", *The Wanganui Herald*, 8 July 1955, p. 4.

did not seek serious art training overseas until age thirty-seven. His experiences at the Royal Scottish Academy of Painting, L'hote's Academy in Paris, and his extensive travels gave him a knowledge of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and Cubism which had few precedents in New Zealand on his return in 1929. Competent but somewhat pedestrian paintings by Weeks, such as *Fruit and Flowers* (c. 1932) and *Limestone Gorge, King Country* (c. 1943), testify to the influence of modern overseas elements on his work. Typical of paintings by many students trained in L'hote's studio, they are formulaic in their application of watered-down analytical cubism. These were not boundary-breaking or avant-garde images for their time, but Weeks, through his teaching particularly, was greatly influential. J. E. Mackie writes of his career: "Detractors he may have had, but for roughly thirty years John Weeks played a prominent part in making an unsophisticated public, more appreciative of the efforts of the New Zealand artist."<sup>106</sup> John Weeks' retrospective show was, in fact, a tribute to his influence on New Zealand art, and represented a revival of interest in the international modernist directions in his work which now, in the context of the work of a younger generation of "wild men" such as Colin McCahon and Toss Woollaston, demanded respect and renewed attention.

Edith Collier's retrospective exhibition occurred in the wake of the McCahon-Woollaston and Weeks shows, and in the wake of a national surge of interest in British, European and North American modernism. A show organised by the Sarjeant Gallery and celebrating the achievements of the town's most significant modern painter well suited the climate of the times, and neglect, in fact, would have been an embarrassing omission. No doubt with some strong encouragement from the Collier family, the retrospective was staged and toured, and to mark Edith's achievements as a Wanganui artist, in 1956 "the [Wanganui] City Council asked Miss Collier if she would sell three pictures of the council's choice; instead she made a gift of "Peasant Woman of Bonmahon" and "A Cornish Woman of Spanish Descent."<sup>107</sup> Apart from the 1955 and 1956 exhibitions, Edith Collier's work was given little formal analysis or attention. Without public recognition or encouragement, she had painted less and less from the late 1930s onwards, finding it increasingly difficult to start a painting. Remembering this period of Edith Collier's life, Patricia Lonsdale writes:

When I was quite young, say 18 or 19, whenever I visited Ringley, I used to say to her "May I see your pictures Eadie?" And she would take me to the room where all her pictures were. There were canvases piled up, leaning against the wall, one on top of another. You could flick through them, just like being in an art gallery. I would say, "When are you going to paint again Eadie?" She would say, "Soon, I am reading and preparing", and she would indicate with her hand to a pile of art books that she would have bought well after her return from England. She was always buying art books. I think she was always thinking about it but never had the confidence or drive to make another start. Procrastination was a big part of her character.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>106</sup> J. E. Mackie, *Some Aspects of the Art of John Weeks*, M. A. Thesis, University of Auckland, 1973. p. 145.

<sup>107</sup> *Edith Collier Retrospective Exhibition*. Wanganui, November 1971, p. 4.

<sup>108</sup> Letter from Patricia Lonsdale to author, 1 April 1993.

Edith Collier always hoped that one day she would take up where she left off and make a new beginning with her art. Although as time passed this possibility became less and less likely, her personal dream of being an artist did not diminish. Commenting recently on the reasons why Edith Collier all but gave up painting, her niece Barbara Stewart states:

Everyone has their own theory as to why Aunt Ede gave up painting - but did she? To me she remained interested in sketching and art until the end of her life.... To me Aunt Ede was a perfectionist about her work, as often she saw so much wrong with it. Often she would draw over her oil painting in chalk.<sup>109</sup>

Edith Collier was adrift without the guidance and encouragement she had received in Britain. Although she always remained interested in painting, she lost confidence and enthusiasm in her work and in pursuing her ideas to completion. Feeling progressively estranged from the role and title of artist, by 1957 Edith Collier's driver's licence described her occupation as "housewife". Without a doubt, though, she remained interested in art, continuing to follow the careers of artists she was interested in, to buy art books, and to retain subscriptions to numerous art magazines. Having reached a similar point in her own life, Charlie Ayliff, who had migrated to New Zealand with her husband from South Africa in the 1930s, seemed to take even less interest in the artistic pursuits of her youth. She responded to an inquiry by Edith Collier about subject matter and sights in Northland, by commenting:

You say that you someday want to go painting and ask about Whangarei - don't ask me my dear - I'm a housewife - not an artist! I think you might be able to find subjects but you know the type of thing? Lamorna Birch did some of it while he was here - [?] Richardson had lots of water colours and Mrs Vane tried to interpret the north too - You would have a completely different thought behind your eye and would make a different interpretation - I hope that you do come north - I'd love to see you again. Why not stay at Seaways and have a look round Auckland first? its years since we met isn't it...?<sup>110</sup>

Charlie Ayliff was similarly estranged from the role of artist and had long since chosen marriage over the "life's work of [her] youth",<sup>111</sup> a career in painting. She wrote to Edith Collier of her new life's work:

I continue to improve in general health and am able to lead a very strenuous life and work in the garden nearly all and every day - Its wonderful being able to do so - my main aim in life in old age is to make a nice garden before I pass on - and then I'll be a dear old lady and potter around in it - At present I'm more like a bull dozer heaving tons of earth around!<sup>112</sup>

<sup>109</sup> This quotation comes from notes made by Barbara Stewart for her 1994 radio interview on Edith Collier.

<sup>110</sup> Letter from Charlie Ayliff to Edith Collier, undated, [1940 ?] Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui. Lamorna Birch R. W. S. was a British artist who made a tour of New Zealand with his wife in 1938. He was a friend of Mary and Murray Fuller, who owned a dealer gallery in Wellington. Although the Fuller's gallery was initially established to handle New Zealand art, "in 1923... [it] expanded to include 'England's most prominent exhibitors. Among.... [them] S. J. Lamorna Birch, who [had] an international reputation." Ann Calhoun, "Two Wellington Entrepreneurs of the 'Thirties: The Murray Fullers". *Art New Zealand*, No. 23, pp. 20-21.

<sup>111</sup> Letter from Charlie Ayliff to Edith Collier, 1 May 1964. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>112</sup> Letter from Charlie Ayliff to Edith Collier, 25 September 1954. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

Accepting in their old age the domestic roles of caring for house and garden, both Edith Collier and Charlie Ayliff looked back at art as a part of their youth and idealism. Having been free to pursue their art overseas, they had both come home to less than sympathetic environments. While one chose the role of dependent wife and the other spinster-daughter, both women were equally restricted by conventional gender expectations.

Edith Collier did experience a brief period of productivity and enthusiasm for painting towards the end of her life. Fannie heard of Edith Collier's rekindled interest in working, and wrote to Dorothy in 1962:

It is good news to hear that Edith has been inspired to get out her drawing materials, I do hope she will feel the itch to paint once more for she has a great gift.<sup>113</sup>

Feeling it necessary to escape the confines of house and family once more, Edith Collier bought a beach house at Mowhanau in 1962 so that she could work alone. Relations between Edith Collier and Bethea and their eccentric sister Dorothy had become increasingly strained and difficult over the years. Jealousies, antagonism, and even at times violence, made it necessary for Edith Collier to remove herself from Ringley to work. Edith Collier's beach house at Mowhanau gave the artist the freedom to work and concentrate on her painting and drawing in a way that she had not been able to do since her days with Eulalie Goldsbury at Kawhia.

Restricted in her work by her health and the difficulties of ageing, Edith Collier must have been able to relate to a letter written by Charlie Ayliff describing her own problems in this area, written just eight months before Edith Collier's death in December 1964:

Well aren't you darlings! I nearly wept when Fdk [her husband] came in with your beautiful bouquet - he found it on the step when he returned after teaching in Takapuna. I wish you could see it - such a lovely arrangement.... I hope you can read this - our humid autumn plays up with my arthritic hands - It seems that once one allows health to vanish one becomes the happy hunting ground of every germ or virus etc - A friend of ours who is a keen spiritualist brought an old dame to see me and wanted me to put myself into her hands - I'm too busy living this life to have time for any others - but I asked her why I'm having such a long period of ill health - She was silent for a few minutes and then said it was a punishment because I had been very arrogant in a former existence! Fdk was furious and more or less showed her to the door!

However in spite of my arrogance I'm much better and the horrid migraine headaches seem to have disappeared - so I am able to read....<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Letter from Fannie Collier to Dorothy Collier, 26 June 1962. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>114</sup> Letter from Charlie Ayliff to Edith Collier, 1 May 1964. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

While Charlie Ayliff recovered from her ill health for a time, in spite of her "arrogance", Edith Collier was not so fortunate. On the night of 12 December 1964, Edith Collier ended her life very much as she had lived it: sitting up in bed sorting out Christmas presents for her nieces and nephews, she died with the interests of others uppermost in her mind. It was Edith Collier's lack of arrogance and ambition that did great damage to her career as an artist. Restricted in her life and work by a conditioned sense of feminine humility and concern for others, Edith Collier never felt the freedom to make choices for herself. Although she wanted to return to Britain and to painting professionally, it was the needs of others that she always considered first. Sylvia Collier wrote from Britain to comfort and console Bethea on the death of her sister:

I am so very sorry to hear of your sad loss of Edith. She spent so many years in England. I have the clearest memories of her visits to us at home - occasionally too I visited her at her London studio. I always hoped to see her again, but she never made up her mind to come to England. I am sure you will feel her loss very greatly.<sup>115</sup>

When Dorothy and Bethea Collier came to sort out their sister's studio and personal effects after her death, they found among Edith Collier's belongings trunks full of unused paints, art materials, and canvases. These items had been purchased over the forty-two year period after her return, some being very recent acquisitions. Although Edith Collier "never made up her mind" to return to England and take up her artistic endeavours, she maintained a passionate, almost secretive connection to that time in her life, and her cherished dream of being an artist. She always hoped that one day she would again begin to paint seriously, but never did.

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<sup>115</sup> Letter from Sylvia [Collier] to Bethea Collier, 28 December 1964. Barbara Stewart Papers, Wanganui.

## Conclusion

Edith Collier was one of the most innovative painters in New Zealand in the 1920s. While Frances Hodgkins decided to remain abroad to be one of many painters in Britain experimenting with modernism, Edith Collier returned home with a set of all but unique innovations which were largely untested on the New Zealand public. The issue of returning to New Zealand was one which loomed large in both the lives of Edith Collier and Frances Hodgkins, and an examination of their individual cases makes a revealing comparison. Their circumstances and the decisions they made relating to repatriation were different and the outcomes equally contrasting. Frances Hodgkins wrote to her mother in November 1911, when contemplating a return trip to New Zealand:

You surely dont expect & want me to settle down into a Maiden Aunt, do you & throw up career & ambition & lose the precious ground I have gained - you are much too dear & unselfish for that I am sure. I am coming out merely to see you & Sis & the children to be with you for a while & then to return to my work like any man of business. To make you happy I must be happy myself. I want to see you badly & feel I must come soon at no matter what sacrifice. But do realise Mother that its on this side of the world that my work and future career lie.<sup>1</sup>

Even before she had arranged the details of her 1912 visit to New Zealand, Frances Hodgkins was careful to re-state and re-emphasise the importance to her of her work and role as an artist, to mark out the boundaries as she saw them of family expectation, and to communicate clearly her intentions for the trip. In no way was she ambiguous about what she wanted from the experience, or what she hoped to achieve personally or professionally. When, a decade later, Edith Collier made a similar journey back to New Zealand, the importance to her of the role of professional artist was not firmly established, either in her mind or her parents'; a limit to the boundaries of family expectation was not set, nor did she have any firm ideas about what she hoped to achieve from her return, personally or professionally. While Frances Hodgkins was in control of her life, had decided herself to return, and therefore felt confident to dictate the perimeters of that return, Edith Collier was not. The decision that Edith Collier should return to New Zealand was made by her parents. They did not give their daughter licence to establish the conditions of that decision, nor did she take it. For one artist this trip reflected a continuation of her will to shape her life and a re-statement of her on-going right to do so, but to the other it

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Rachel Hodgkins, 27 November 1911. Quoted in L. Gill ed., *Letters of Frances Hodgkins*. Auckland, 1993, p. 259.

represented an immediate loss of self-determined direction, and ultimately the loss of the liberty ever to have one again.

While Frances Hodgkins' ambition compelled her to challenge any expectation that she would settle down in New Zealand and adopt the roles of spinster daughter and maiden aunt, Edith Collier's ambition seems to have been swallowed up by things domestic. The difference in reaction at this point remains central to the outcome of Frances Hodgkins' and Edith Collier's careers, and at its heart it is inextricably linked to questions of self-determination and artistic ego. Frances Hodgkins saw her role, her 'business' of teaching and art making, as being more important than the sentimentalities of personal relationships and family obligation. Instead of responding with guilt to what New Zealand society would see as an obvious short-coming in this area, she inverted the onus of blame, implying that it was the expectations rather than her response to them that were unreasonable. Edith Collier, by contrast, had a much more traditionally female sense of self and self-determination. The claims she made for her career were equivocal and tentative. She accepted a greater diversity of roles, including those of domestic helper and care-giver, and did not rank her traditionally masculine pursuits above those which are traditionally feminine. Her vision for the future was not as well-defined as Frances Hodgkins', nor were her career goals and objectives as clear. In short, Edith Collier's artistic career was subject to the same competition for resources of time and energy as many other more mundane aspects of her life. She did not have the artistic ego or sense of self-determination to place her profession above all else, and to give it the single-minded attention required.

It is tempting to regard Frances Hodgkins as having a healthy ego and sense of self-worth, and, by contrast, to consider Edith Collier's as deficient or flawed. Both women were brought up, socialised, and indoctrinated in the later part of the nineteenth century. Although "their times told them of woman's right to choose and a woman's ability to achieve, their society discouraged them from analysing their choices and conditioned them to minimise their achievements."<sup>2</sup> Being raised in this social context, it was very difficult for a woman to develop the self-confidence which would allow the cultivation of personal talent at the expense of social convention. They were not given the social mandate to see it as a valuable commodity, or encouraged to nurture it at all costs. On the contrary, women were conditioned to see their skills and talent as part of life's continuum where all were encouraged, few refined, and even less were allowed to reach the outer limits of self-obsessed absorption. Edith Collier's inability

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<sup>2</sup> P. Gerrish Nunn, *Canvassing: Recollections by Six Victorian Women Artists*. London, 1986, p. 17.

to put her art first reflects the values and conditioning of women of her time far more closely than the aberrant ambition of Frances Hodgkins.

Writers and art historians have been enticed by the "tragic demise"<sup>3</sup> of Edith Collier's career to speculate on a date, an event, or a specific reason for her giving up painting after her return to New Zealand. However, it was the 'return' in itself that ultimately proved the biggest obstacle to her working. Once her life was again directed by Henry and Eliza, and colonised by her brothers and sisters and their many children, she became distracted and demoralised, gradually losing her commitment to her career. In New Zealand Edith Collier found her life progressively full of people, and less and less solitary. By contrast, Frances Hodgkins was much more acutely aware of the pitfalls of social demands:

I think an artist's life is a very hard working and busy one - there is no rest this side of the grave - and also a very lonely one - you haven't time for friends - of course I am aging and find life a strain... I find the social side of living a great problem - Art is definitely anti-social - you can only work in solitude - that is, work creatively. I have to severely limit my circle of friends.<sup>4</sup>

The independence and liberty that had given Edith Collier a sense of euphoric power in her first months in Britain, and had sustained her creative energy throughout her nine-year stay, was ended once she was forced to return home. Her time of self-direction and relative freedom from obligation was over, and with it evaporated her drive, ambition, and artistic independence. Although she continued to work after her return, her life was no longer her own property, and this ownership was far more fundamental to her achievements than has been previously recognised in New Zealand art history.

Edith Collier's life of relative financial security was also a highly significant factor in shaping the direction and outcome of her career. As money had given Edith her first opportunities of overseas travel and study, so on her return it offered her a way of life free from the financial pressures of being a professional artist. Ironically, even when Henry was working with his daughter's well-being in mind, his actions did not necessarily make a positive contribution to Edith's career. The financial support that he offered his daughter during his life, and even after his death, had an ultimately negative impact on her artistic production. Elizabeth Plumridge explains this phenomenon:

In the catalogue to the Edith Collier exhibition, Gordon Brown argues that Collier's potential might have blossomed into a further brilliance 'had circumstances been kinder to this modest, retiring woman'. On the contrary, in certain senses, circumstances were just too kind to Collier. Her family was at least

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Plumridge ("The Thwarted Career of Artist Edith Collier, *Comment*, No. 11, p. 18) and Gordon Brown (*Edith Collier in Retrospect*, Wanganui, p. 21) are two significant writers on Edith Collier who have made reference to the thwarted tragic nature of her career.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from Frances Hodgkins to Willie Hodgkins, 22 July 1939. Quoted in E. H. McCormick, *The Expatriate: A Study of Frances Hodgkins*. Wellington, 1954, p. 231.



comfortably well off; her father might have tyrannised, but her brothers and sisters loved and their children adored. It was seductively easy and reassuring to feel needed, wanted and worthwhile in the midst of loving claims for attention.<sup>5</sup>

Because her artistic endeavours were not essential to her support, they did not receive the attention they would otherwise have commanded. Nor were they taken as seriously as they should have been by her family and friends. She felt no great need to promote her career after her arrival in New Zealand, and therefore did not see a return to Britain as being essential to her future artistic development. While Frances Hodgkins felt compelled to return to Europe, where she believed her professional 'work and future career' lay, Edith Collier's aspirations to go back to Britain remained vague. She wished to live in London again and resume her artistic contacts, but this wish was never pursued with any sense of urgency or commitment. Because her future was already financially secure, there was no pressing need to make the trip back; as a result her art could remain comfortably amateur, with no need to become a profession.

Edith Collier's financial security affected other aspects of her artistic life. Her wealth meant that there were few incentives for her to sell her work in New Zealand, so it remained largely untested on the domestic art market throughout her life. Artistic reputation and market value are often closely linked, and Edith Collier, in not selling her work, missed an important opportunity to establish her creative credibility and fiscal worth. Instead, gradually becoming more protective and attached to the paintings, drawings and prints she produced overseas, she began to see her creative output as being largely associated with the past rather than part of her ongoing life in New Zealand. Family sources suggest that her British and Irish work became for her not so much art as precious artefacts, and the studio where her paintings were stored a shrine to a time in her life she wished never to forget, but to which she could never return.<sup>6</sup> Her high regard for these works was, equally, an impediment to her subsequent painting. The majority of her New Zealand work seemed to her pale by comparison. Her artistic career was now haunted by the ghost of her overseas production which seemed to loom much larger and more magnificent than anything she could create at home. Over time it appeared pointless and even humiliating to produce work which compromised her earlier achievements so much, and the natural outcome was that she painted less and less.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> E. Plumridge, "The Thwarted Career of Artist Edith Collier". *Comment*, No. 11, June 1980, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted with Jean Stewart, 21 October 1997.

<sup>7</sup> In conversations with the author from 1992 to 1998, Barbara Stewart made the point many times that Edith Collier was a perfectionist, and that she regarded much of her later work as being inferior to that which she produced in Britain. She went over some of her large New Zealand oils in blue crayon with the intention of making corrections. She gave Barbara Stewart two oil paintings for her birthday only on the basis that *View Through Giant Trunks* (1930: see cat. no. 475) and *Landscape Framed by Tree* (1930: see cat. no. 476) were hung in her bedroom so no one would see them.

Nonetheless, there were several occasions after Edith Collier's return to New Zealand when she could perhaps have revived her career, and rekindled her passion for painting. Margaret Preston's visit to Wanganui in 1931-1932 was one such occasion. In contrast to Edith Collier's experiences in New Zealand, Margaret Preston had returned to Australia to become one of the best known artists of her time. She wrote and published prolifically, missing no opportunity to put herself or her work before the Australian public. As Elizabeth Butel explains:

In all she wrote fourteen articles for *Art in Australia*, thirteen for *The Home*, nine for *Australia National*. As well, three of Ure Smith's major publications were exclusively devoted to her work: the *Margaret Preston Number of Art in Australia* (1927), *Margaret Preston's Recent Paintings* (1929), and *Margaret Preston's Monotypes* (1949).<sup>8</sup>

Margaret Preston promoted her career assiduously, and in doing so made many important friends and contacts on the Australian art scene. When she stayed with Edith Collier in the early 1930s, there is no evidence that the New Zealander was inspired to promote her own work, to use this event as an opportunity to renew her artistic relationship with Margaret Preston, or take advantage of her friend and ex-mentor's artistic contacts in Australia. While Margaret Preston and Frances Hodgkins had both been successful in their ventures into the Australian art market, it seems Edith Collier did not see this as a viable option.

The most convincing explanation for Edith Collier's passivity lies in Margaret Preston's character, and in Edith Collier's state of mind at this stage. Margaret Preston was as reluctant to involve a New Zealander in 'her second life', as she was Gladys Reynell. In addition, by the beginning of the 1930s Edith Collier's separation from the public and professional persona of the painter had almost become complete. By this time she perceived herself as a person whose primary role was now that of nurturer and care-giver to her family. The opportunities that, with hindsight, she seems frustratingly to have missed, were not opportunities to her at all because they were incongruous with the way she had come to see herself and her future career. Equally incongruous with this perception were her exhibition successes. Her achievement of a medal and inclusion in the 1938 International Business Machines Corporation Exhibition in New York, and her selection for the Centennial Exhibition of International and New Zealand Art in 1939, were events which might realistically have provided the impetus for a more concerted effort to work and promote her painting, but this did not occur. In reality, Edith Collier did not view these exhibitions with any real sense of achievement because she had already lost her artistic drive and ambition.

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<sup>8</sup> E. Butel, *Margaret Preston: The Art of Constant Rearrangement*. Ringwood, 1986, p. 22.

Edith Collier's decision to return to live and work in Wanganui, an artistically conservative parochial community, also had major ramifications for her career. If the beginnings of artistic tolerance could be detected in the 1920s in larger populations such as Christchurch, Wellington, and Auckland, this more expansive vision was certainly not shared by the artistic circles of Wanganui. It would be comforting to share Derek Schulz's optimistic belief that:

[there] is emerging from recent research... evidence for the existence in Wanganui of a small group of progressive artists and art admirers. It is also true that in the 1920s the Wanganui Art and Craft Society was at the peak of its influence with over 700 exhibits at its 1926 exhibition, including the work of most major New Zealand painters.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, this vision of Wanganui in the 1920s is as naive as the word 'progressive' is problematic. The concept of art being 'progressive' is entirely relative to what has come before. This group may have been advanced in terms of art in Wanganui, but it cannot be assumed that they would understand or be sympathetic to the innovations of British modernism evident in Edith Collier's work. Nor should it be concluded that the large number of participants in the Wanganui Art and Craft Society exhibition in 1926 reflects an informed membership, or a broad-minded and artistically educated wider community. On the contrary, it is certain that Edith Collier's career experienced the full impact of the phenomenon known as 'cultural lag',<sup>10</sup> or the time an idea takes to diffuse from a major artistic centre to a provincial outpost like Wanganui. Because of cultural lag, Edith Collier was a misfit in her own family and community. She had changed, and her ideas about art had changed after her exposure to progressive artistic circles, and the opportunity to view contemporary British and European art. Eliza's ominous words spoken in 1914 had come back to haunt the Collier family:

And so you don't think much of some of the pictures at the Royal A. you must be getting hard to please what will you do when you come back to our wee city - I'm afraid you'll do a lot of grumbling.<sup>11</sup>

Although modernist innovations are present in many of the paintings she produced soon after her return, in her later works these are largely missing. As Derek Schulz points out:

The sharp modernist construction with its detailing angular vision and the heady experimentation which marked her European work are replaced by a more conservative sedentary composition. Without the support of daily access to London galleries and comment and criticism from artists fully aware of the latest development on the art scene, Collier seems to have been at a loss as to how to approach the local landscape and its inhabitants.<sup>12</sup>

Edith Collier was subject to pressure to produce work which was "merely pleasing", both at home, by her family, and outside in the wider community. Experimentation, in terms of style or subject matter, was considered unladylike even in the 1920s. The perception of the woman

<sup>9</sup> D. Schulz, "Edith Collier 'returns'". *Wanganui Chronicle*, 13 February 1982, Artists' Scrapbook, National Library.

<sup>10</sup> F. Pound, *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand*. Auckland, 1983, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from Eliza Collier to Edith Collier, 23 June 1914. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui.

<sup>12</sup> D. Schulz, "Edith Collier in Europe". *Art New Zealand*, Vol. 42, p. 77.

painter as beautifier of the home and a fortifier of conservative middle-class values was as damaging to Edith Collier's career as it was to many other women artists of this period. The prescriptions for appropriate subject matter and stylistic approach were clear, and the consequences of moving beyond them serious. Henry's destruction of Edith Collier's paintings of the female nude and some of her modern works was an act of punishment for his daughter's perceived infringements in these areas. His actions were seated in the intense feelings of homophobia which gripped people's minds and imaginations after the Mackay-Cresswell trial. Like other sober citizens of Wanganui, he associated aberrant behaviour with the artistic, the fringe, and the avant-garde, all seeming to him to be evident in his daughter's subject matter and her modernity.

Edith Collier's position was not unique but symptomatic of a generation's experience. Interesting parallels, particularly relating to the issue of modernity, can be made between Edith Collier and the career of Norah Simpson in Australia. Norah Simpson travelled to Britain and studied at the Westminster School of Art where Harold Gilman, Spencer Gore and Charles Ginner were her teachers. She wrote of this time:

[I]t was through Gilman that I got my first introduction to modern painting and sculpture. On a trip to Paris at this time I was able to see a considerable number of French Impressionists and Pointilliste paintings and works by Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso etc. in the private collections of several of the Parisian art dealers to whom I had introductions from Gilman.<sup>13</sup>

Like Edith Collier, Norah Simpson returned home, in her case in 1913, with a view of art which was incomprehensible to most Australians: her ideas were received without a conceptual framework of knowledge and experience, and therefore her artistic career was similarly problematic. While Edith came back to provincial Wanganui, Norah returned to the city of Sydney, and though it might be assumed that a larger, progressive art centre would be more sympathetic to innovation, this was not the case. Norah Simpson's photographs and books of Post-Impressionist and Cubist works met with great hostility and prejudice, but in spite of adverse reactions, Helen Topliss believes "It is possible that Simpson's reproductions had some influence on Grace Cossington Smith... at this early stage, there was not much else to reinforce a modernist inclination, that is, beyond the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist mode...."<sup>14</sup> Norah Simpson brought back advanced artistic innovations from Britain and Europe, and it was not until Grace Crowley and Anne Dangar went to Paris in the late 1920s that Australians were again introduced to ideas of similar merit.<sup>15</sup> Edith Collier and Norah Simpson returned to their home countries with artistic ideas that were too advanced to be appreciated at the time. They

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Helen Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900-1940*. Sydney, 1996, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Crowley and Dangar sent regular letters back to Sydney Art School students which were published in the school's magazine.

were lone voices in a desert of ignorance, and neither woman could sustain her convictions in such a parched environment.

In New Zealand, while much of the talent that had sprung up in the later part of the nineteenth century, such as Frances Hodgkins, Grace Joel, Raymond McIntyre, and Owen Merton, remained steadfastly abroad, the artists who returned and dominated New Zealand in the early 1920s were only very mildly influenced by modernist developments in Europe, if at all. Francis McCracken, John Weeks and Robert Johnson, all ex-servicemen, returned to New Zealand in 1919, and joined together to tour a national exhibition of their work. The popular response to their show had more to do with their profiles as returned soldiers than their achievements as artists. Describing the impact and significance of the exhibition, J. E. Mackie states:

One thing seems obvious: that there would be more than passing notice in their paintings, is not surprising, if only for the reason that they were the work of three returned soldiers, in whose artistic activities a grateful public would naturally pay compassionate interest. But, that is only a small part of the answer, for both nationally and locally the position of art in New Zealand at that time was very 'very gloomy'....<sup>16</sup>

John Weeks was the most promising of the three painters, but the benefits of his modern training were not to be appreciated in New Zealand until his return from a 1923-1929 stay abroad. Maud Sherwood and Rhona Haszard's work exhibited some modern tendencies, and they were active in the Dominion during some of the 1920s, but Rhona Haszard was killed in 1931, and Maud Sherwood settled permanently in Australia in 1933. Dorothy Kate Richmond, Margaret Stoddart, and Sydney Thompson were also active participants on the New Zealand art scene. Their work was critically well received and well purchased, but did not reflect the modernist innovations which would have established a context of understanding for the reception of Edith Collier's or Mina Arndt's work. Mina Arndt returned to New Zealand in 1914, and because of her art training in Germany and Britain she represented one of very few modern painters in New Zealand at the time. Unfortunately, her fate was not dissimilar to that of Edith Collier, and she ended up living in Motueka, where she faced inevitable difficulties and restrictions of provincial isolation. Sadly, Mina Arndt died in 1926. The New Zealand art scene in the 1920s was not a fertile environment for the innovations that Edith Collier brought back.

In fact, the work which Edith Collier produced and exhibited in New Zealand after her return was among the most innovative in the country for almost a decade. Only Rhona Haszard and

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<sup>16</sup> J. E. Mackie. "Some Aspects of the Art of John Weeks". M. A. Thesis, University of Auckland, 1973, p. 45.

R. N. Field, who both worked in a Post-Impressionist manner and were in the forefront of innovation in New Zealand, could offer anything to equal Edith Collier's achievement in her Academy exhibitions of 1927 and 1928, and in the Group shows of 1929 and 1931.

Otherwise, there were few painters whose work suggested anything more adventurous than the conventions of Post-Impressionism. Even Christopher Perkins' modern icons of New Zealand, such as *Taranaki* (1931), referred to a relatively conservative Post-Impressionist tradition where symbolism and subject matter were as important as formalist concerns. By contrast, Edith's British art, which in many cases she did not exhibit until the mid-1950s (if at all), surpassed in innovation most of what was being seen and reviewed in New Zealand for nearly two decades after her return. Only the painting of John Weeks with its cubist references offers a close approximation. In fact, the abstractions of Edith's nudes and the ambiguities of her St. Ives work, the lyrical, calligraphic self-consciousness of making a picture (beyond the constraints of subject-matter and reality), achievements she had learned from Hodgkins and from her observation of Matisse, did not establish themselves in New Zealand until they were re-discovered in the 1940s by a new generation of artists who were domestically trained, but informed by international modernism. Two of the leading exponents of this later generation were Colin McCahon and Toss Woollaston.

While Edith Collier's New Zealand images were not affirmed as wholeheartedly as those of some now better known artists, she did in fact produce quite a body of domestic work, and the notion of her 'giving up' painting after her return requires some qualification. Edith Collier produced 126 paintings, drawings, and one wood-block print after 1922, and filled (or partly-filled in three instances) eight work books mainly with sketches of hill-country scenery, sheep, and tree and foliage studies, but also one with portrait studies. She painted sixty-one oils, fourteen watercolours, and produced fifty pastel and charcoal sketches and drawings. Edith did not stop working until about 1942, but what she did do during this period was to become much more ambivalent about her commitment to pursuing a modern manner of working.

In fact, the degree of Edith Collier's commitment to using modern stylistic elements in her work changed at various stages throughout her life, and this has given her oeuvre the appearance of being episodic. As a result, Gordon Brown, for example, has asserted that the "quality of her work is uneven",<sup>17</sup> and that "she remained on the edge of achievement",<sup>18</sup> and by inference the edge of artistic maturity. However, one of Edith Collier's primary motivations from 1915 until 1922 was to work innovatively, and this process for her inevitably involved some periods

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<sup>17</sup> G. Brown and H. Keith, *An Introduction to New Zealand Painting, 1839-1980*. Auckland, 1988, p. 7.  
<sup>18</sup> Sarjeant Gallery, *Edith Collier in Retrospect*. Wanganui, 1980, p. 21.

which were more experimentally driven than others. Experimentation is searching, boundary-breaking and by nature inherently inconsistent, and these inconsistencies are reflected in her pictorial problem-solving, and in the advances and retrenchments of her British work. In addition, significant passages of work in Edith Collier's oeuvre have been destroyed, and this has reinforced the sense of inconsistency in her oeuvre. On four occasions in her life, large groups of works were destroyed. In 1914 or 1915, she deliberately burned some of her early art, while a year or so later she accidentally knocked three months' work into the fire. Her father, Henry, burned a considerable group of paintings (at least eighteen, possibly more) in 1926, and in 1941 a fire burned the Wakarua family homestead to the ground, destroying more paintings, prints and sketches. And, though Edith did not sell many works over her career, she did sell some, and the majority of these have not come to light.

Edith Collier achieved an artistic maturity and sustained commitment to innovation in her work in the last four years of her time in Britain, but the consolidation of this maturity, and the further working through of her directions and ideas, did not take place. Her relocation to New Zealand in 1922 truncated this process, and her momentum to experiment was lost. Instead of engaging further with the fluid, decorative, abstractions of Matisse or the cubist analysis of form suggested by the work of Picasso, both of which she viewed in 1919, or even with the fluid, calligraphic watercolours of Frances Hodgkins, Edith Collier adopted a relatively high-coloured Post-Impressionist manner of painting which was distinctly less controversial than the directions she had previously taken. Though Edith had been exposed to, understood, and had adopted innovations in Britain which were daring in their modernity (especially for New Zealand), it was to an earlier way of working that she returned. In essence, modernism was a discourse that flourished in a particular climate of thought, of artistic action and reaction, and in 1920 this discourse and climate of ideas had not yet established itself in New Zealand: inevitably, Edith had to make adjustments to suit her new environment.

Negative critical response in New Zealand to the innovations evident in Edith Collier's work offers a cogent, but not completely comprehensive explanation for her shift in direction. It is certain that the change in Edith Collier's manner of working also reflects a personal choice which had both a private and professional motive. Edith's return to New Zealand signalled the beginning of a more personal phase in her oeuvre, which offered different priorities and preoccupations than those which had shaped her art in Britain. Her subjects were very often family members, and the iconography of her landscape was dictated by what was close at hand and convenient. Her drive to experiment and explore became secondary to the pleasure she found in recording and celebrating her family and the familiar farmland around her. In addition to this change in her motivation, Edith Collier also made a thoughtful, calculated attempt to

locate some of her work more strategically in the discourse of New Zealand art history. What dominated New Zealand culture in the 1920s, 30s and even 40s was less the drive towards a modernist resolution of aesthetics, than a search in both the visual and literary arts for a sense of national and cultural identity. A primary concern to many artists and writers in New Zealand at this time was what made their country different from the rest of the world. The most obvious physical feature was the landscape, and the most obvious cultural component, the Maori. Edith Collier's paintings of Maori and her landscape, particularly her landscape around Kawhia, placed her work in the context of New Zealand debates. In shifting back to New Zealand, Edith Collier dramatically changed the artistic environment in which she was operating, and the changes that occurred in her work, when examined in this light, represent as much an adaptation or shift in vision as they do a compromise.

Edith Collier's engagement with New Zealand iconography, however, was clever, but neither single-minded nor sustained. She did not continue her work with Maori at Kawhia after 1928, and her pictures of bush-covered hill country and lush pastoral paintings of scenery round Wanganui ill-fitted the iconic images of New Zealand landscape which were becoming synonymous with the language of painting in this country. This imagery, forged largely by the Canterbury School of artists on the spartan backbone of the Southern Alps, took its early shape in the work of Margaret Stoddart, was present in the paintings of Archibald Nicoll, and further refined in images by Rata Lovell-Smith, Rita Angus and later William Sutton. Crisp-edged, print-like, mundane, regionalist images of New Zealand were believed to answer the critical call for archetypal paintings of the land. Though Edith Collier produced quite a body of landscape and tree paintings and drawings after her return (eighty-seven to be exact), many of them seem quite antithetical to the images which were being heralded as the new direction in New Zealand art. Inevitably, Edith's exhibition career in this country reflects the divided nature of her situation. She had work which she knew to be competent and soundly placed in the debates and priorities of another part of the world, which when shown in New Zealand was greeted with little understanding. The New Zealand discourse, however, had much less appeal for her, and in the middle years of her life she was prepared to paint only what personally appealed to and captured her imagination. She often exhibited that which she knew to be modern, together with that which she knew would suit her New Zealand situation. Edith Collier's predicament was not so much that she was an immature or unresolved artist, but that at heart she was a British modernist, and anything she felt able to produce in New Zealand was inevitably a compromise.

Edith Collier's biography is one of relative ignorance toward her innovations and of neglect of her career, but it is also a biography which at times offers a contrary reading. It is essential, in



fact, to acknowledge the instances of considerable interest that her career commanded, both during her lifetime and after her death in 1964. Though her initial reception in Wanganui in 1926 was greeted largely with derision and scorn, her entrée onto the New Zealand art scene with her involvement in the 1927 and 1928 Academy exhibitions and the Canterbury Society of Arts shows initiated a lasting interest in her career by a select but influential few on the New Zealand art scene. This thread of interest was a response to two aspects of her oeuvre. Edith's painting was noticed for its modernity as an example of the latest trends in overseas art, and her Kawhia painting, especially her portraits and figure studies of Maori, established for her a place in New Zealand art as a competent painter working with this important indigenous theme. The validation of Edith's career by influential people on the art scene was further reflected in her invitations to exhibit with The Group in Christchurch in 1929 and 1931, and then again later with her inclusion in the 1937 Empire Art Exhibition, and 1939 Centennial Exhibition of International and New Zealand Art.

Edith again received considerable attention in her three retrospective shows of 1955-56, 1971 and 1980. The 1971 show was a substantial civic event in Wanganui which included a total of eighty-six works, fifty-four from her time in Britain and Ireland, and thirty-two works from her time in New Zealand. This show did not tour beyond Wanganui. The 1980 retrospective, however, included seventy-five works, and travelled to nine centres, including the Rotorua Gallery, Govett Brewster Gallery, Hawkes Bay Art Gallery and Museum, Hocken Library, Bishop Suter Gallery, Wairarapa Art Centre, Gisborne Art Gallery and Museum, Waikato Art Museum and the Auckland City Art Gallery. The exhibition constituted fifty-six British and Irish works, and eighteen works executed after her return to New Zealand. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue which included an introduction by Sarjeant Gallery director Bill Milbank, and essays by Janet Paul, Gordon Brown, and Deborah Frederikse. This was a significant event in the history of art in this country, and attracted considerable interest and attention throughout New Zealand.

Interest in Edith's career was not of course restricted to the formal public art world. Edith throughout her life received considerable support from her family and friends, and this support certainly propelled her career forwards at crucial times. Though her parents might justifiably be criticised for their actions in controlling Edith, they were also the people who encouraged her to go overseas, and paid for her expenses and education for nine years. Family support was maintained during her stay in Britain by her uncle and aunt, Frederic and Frances Collier, and by her brothers and cousins, and especially her cousin Fannie. She also received much support and encouragement from her artist colleagues, and particularly from her teachers Margaret Macpherson and Frances Hodgkins. On Edith's return to Wanganui, Fannie maintained an

interest in her career, encouraging and supporting her cousin's work by sending books, articles and news of the British art scene. And although there were occasional difficulties between Edith and her sister Dorothy after her return to New Zealand, it was Dorothy who sent Edith's paintings for selection in the 1938 International Business Machines Corporation Exhibition in New York, Bethea and Dorothy who encouraged the 1955-56 and 1971 exhibitions, and again Dorothy who, after Bethea's death, was a vital source of information and motivation for the 1980 retrospective of Edith's work. After Dorothy's death in 1983, the caretaking of Edith's work and estate became the responsibility of Barbara Stewart, who has been equally diligent in protecting and promoting her aunt's work and career.

Understandably, some art historians have portrayed Edith Collier as a sweet, passive spinster<sup>19</sup> who was crushed by the notorious New Zealand 'tall poppy-machine', but this approach is far too simplistic and not historically accurate. She has been portrayed as a retiring individual, introverted, humble, loving, and, reading between the lines, far too good for this world. While Edith Collier was some of all these things, this is only part of a much more complex picture. Her life speaks also of an adventurer, of a woman unafraid to face new challenges and explore the boundaries, both of art and of her own abilities. She was enthusiastic about life, she worked hard, and took in her stride hurdles that many women contemporary with her would have found daunting and demoralising. She was not one of life's crushed victims, nor was she brutalised into silence and invisibility. Edith Collier, in a sense, voluntarily retired from her work, and in doing so maintained a quiet confidence in herself, and even a certain arrogance about her achievements. She was openly cynical about much that happened on the New Zealand art scene, and believed fervently in the superiority of her education and experiences overseas.<sup>20</sup> And, although Edith Collier's company in New Zealand after her return was largely domestic, being that of women and children, even this did not mark a dramatic change with her past. Deeply suspicious of men, Edith Collier had always sought out the company of women. In Britain they were often painters, musicians, writers, academics, or accomplished spinsters of the middle-class, while in New Zealand they were most often mothers or maiden aunts whose lives in Wanganui had not given them the same opportunity. It was in this company that Edith Collier felt most at home, but it was also in this company that she was least visible and influential. In truth, even after her return to New Zealand, Edith Collier remained a strong woman with heartfelt convictions, a wry sense of humour, and a natural love of life and fun.

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<sup>19</sup> Janet Paul refers to Edith Collier as "resolutely private.... reserved, humorous, capable and loved" (*Edith Collier in Retrospect*, p. 5, 18), while Gordon Brown describes her as "this modest retiring woman" (*Edith Collier in Retrospect*, p. 21), and Elizabeth Plumridge "as a charming lady - humorous and sincere as a friend, capable and loving as an aunt" ("The Thwarted Career of Artist Edith Collier", p. 21).

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Barbara Stewart conducted, 21 May 1993.

The advance of Edith Collier's career, and also the acknowledgment of her achievement as a significant New Zealand artist, was certainly disadvantaged by the fact that she was a woman returning with innovative work and ideas, rather than a man. Expectation, in terms of the high hopes for leadership and teaching that the art scene in New Zealand had of its favoured artists (such as Christopher Perkins, John Weeks, and R. N. Field), and exposure, or more specifically, the opportunities to exhibit in recognised venues, to publish, or to have works reproduced in journals such as *Art in New Zealand*, were not given out evenly to both men and women. In New Zealand there was a general understanding that innovation and a rejuvenation of the stagnant domestic art scene in the 1920s and 1930s would come either from La Trobe teachers, or from men who had trained overseas. There is no doubt that critics writing about Collier's work from the 1920s to early 1940s did not expect to find innovative ideas and direction for New Zealand art in the work of a spinster from provincial Wanganui, and therefore either did not see it, roundly dismissed it, or refrained from loudly announcing its merit or offering her work the distinction of sustained analysis. The relative lack of recognition that Edith Collier received in this pivotal twenty year period exhausted the artist's personal drive, but perhaps even more significantly, it did not establish the foundations of interest and debate which would allow her career to be properly woven into the fabric of art historical discussion by subsequent writers.

While Edith Collier's sex played an important part in obscuring her achievement, perhaps the greatest obstacle to full recognition and acknowledgment of her talents and contribution to New Zealand art history remains her isolation. This isolation is two-fold, being both physical and theoretical. Without doubt, her physical distance from the major centres of art production and discussion did nothing to promote her work in New Zealand or encourage her career. The relative isolation of Wanganui, with its own conservative art population, and corresponding lack of outside support and ideas, would undoubtedly have taken its toll. It is interesting to speculate where her career would have gone if, like Margaret Preston, she had returned to cosmopolitan Sydney instead of provincial Wanganui. Geography, however, is only part of Edith Collier's isolation. Her second, and probably most profound isolation, has been that of her distance from the discourse of the theory of national style, which has marked out the boundaries of New Zealand art history and determined the value of artistic careers accordingly. The fact that the majority of Edith Collier's innovative work deals with British and Irish scenes and subject matter has seriously disadvantaged her reputation. Sadly, while the stranglehold of Gordon Brown and Hamish Keith's theory of national style has lost its grip on art history, little re-evaluation of the artists they dismissed has been done in light of new perspectives. If the development of modernist innovations was made the new criterion for establishing rank and

importance, then surely Edith Collier would deserve substantive recognition for her achievements, and her singular and outstanding position as an early New Zealand modernist.

The geographic determinism advocated by the national style theory meant Edith Collier inevitably missed out on being credited with the achievement she deserved. As a result of this blinkered vision of New Zealand art history, Edith Collier has been relegated to the position of a minor artist, who is perpetually discovered and then re-discovered, but never actually establishes a solid foothold in the discourse of domestic art history. In 1955, S. B. MacLennan described Edith Collier "as a painter who has earned a very distinguished place in the art of this country",<sup>21</sup> while T. M. Barrett, in the catalogue to Collier's 1971 retrospective exhibition at the Sarjeant Gallery, commented that, "If one were asked to name Wanganui's most notable artist there is little doubt that the name of Edith Collier would rise first to lips.... Yet, in spite of her status, she was known to but a few, even in her own town."<sup>22</sup> Then again in 1980 and 1981 art columnists headed articles with captions such as "Fine works of little-known artist displayed",<sup>23</sup> "Gifted, unrecognised"<sup>24</sup> and "Neglected talent".<sup>25</sup> It seems that each time art critics and journalists alike are flushed with excitement over Edith Collier's work, there is initial consternation over why more is not known of this talented artist, and then she disappears again for another decade or so. Her works emerge from the darkness like jewels, but are inevitably put away too quickly and forgotten. She has been discovered and re-discovered. It is time for Edith Collier's stature as an artist to be established, and her reputation secured.

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<sup>21</sup> S. B. MacLennan, "Edith Collier's Art in Fine Exhibition". Wellington, 1955, n. p. Edith Collier Papers, Sarjeant Gallery Wanganui.

<sup>22</sup> *Edith Collier Retrospective Exhibition*. Wanganui, 1971, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Neil Rowe, "Fine works of little-known artist displayed". *Evening Post*, 22 May 1980, Artists' Scrapbook, National Library, Wellington.

<sup>24</sup> Irene Buxton, "Gifted, unrecognised". *Taranaki Daily News*, 27 September 1980, Artists' Scrapbook, National Library, Wellington.

<sup>25</sup> "Neglected Talent". *Nelson Evening Mail*, 28 January 1981, Artists' Scrapbook, National Library, Wellington.